

ADVENT
DEVOTIONS

NAMES of
Jesus

PROPHET
MESSIAH
Image of the Invisible God
MIGHTY GOD
SAVIOR
REDEEMER
LAMB OF GOD
SON OF GOD
KING OF KINGS
Messenger of the Covenant
FAITHFUL and TRUE
LORD OF LORDS
Chief Cornerstone
IMMANUEL
BRIGHT MORNING STAR
SHEPHERD
Wonderful Counselor
PRINCE OF PEACE
Light for the Gentiles
LORD
WORD
Everlasting Father
Lion of Judah
Head of the Church



A gift to you from

MARTIN LUTHER COLLEGE

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We pray that our Lord
would strengthen your faith
through his holy Word.*





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Branch

"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." (Jeremiah 23:5)

Jeremiah lived through one of history's darkest times: Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem. The walls and houses were demolished, Solomon's temple was burned, and most survivors were deported to Babylon. Zedekiah, the king of God's people, was blinded moments after witnessing the execution of his sons.

In the face of this mayhem and terror, the Lord offered a promise: "The days are coming . . . when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch" (Jeremiah 23:5). David's celebrated family tree had been cut down. The greatness was gone. All that was left was what looked like a lifeless stump. And yet, from this lowly remnant, God pledges to provide a fresh Branch, a faultless Branch, a holy and everlasting king. Despite the devastation of Jeremiah's era, God's plan for salvation through his only Son could never be uprooted. Jesus, the perfect Branch, would sacrifice his life on another tree. His suffering of the punishment deserved by all sinners on the cross of Calvary opened heaven to believers.

In a time of seeming chaos and panic, our almighty Father remained in complete control. He directed everything for the good of his children, even though this plan included the sacrifice of his most precious treasure, his own innocent Son.

Since the Middle Ages, artists have made "Jesse Trees" to illustrate Jesus' ancestry—the fulfillment of God's vow in Jeremiah. The name comes from Isaiah 11:1: "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit." This prophecy is the origin of a botanical metaphor to represent family. King David's father, Jesse, is depicted beside a tree trunk at the bottom, with limbs ascending to fill the space with figures from the Savior's lineage. The highest branch leads to Christ, the blossoming flower. In stained glass windows or illuminated manuscripts, these images offer a vivid reminder that human history is the story of God's promises kept. This genealogy is a beautiful portrait of God's faithfulness across 4,000 years.

Today, some Christians assemble Jesse Trees during Advent to ponder the thread of redemption woven through the Old Testament. Family devotions highlight Bible readings that trace the Messiah's ancestry. A bare branch is decorated with a daily ornament, each offering a symbol related to the featured text.

When this practice began, the Jesse Tree was intended to share the story of salvation with illiterate people who were unable to comprehend the printed language of the Bible. To contemporary Christians, God's guiding hand can seem similarly indecipherable in the unrest and turmoil of this sinful world. The narratives and visuals of the Jesse Tree offer blessed evidence that because of his great love for us, our Creator intervened to rescue his children.

Dear Lord, when I am tempted to let the confusion of this broken Earth shift my focus from your cross, let worship and your Word remind me that your pledge of heaven through Christ remains forever steadfast. Amen.

Paul Grubbs serves Martin Luther College as a professor of English.



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Bright Morning Star

DECEMBER 2

"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel." (Numbers 24:17)

"I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star." (Revelation 22:16)

An angel or a star? When it comes to Christmas tree toppers, people often have strong opinions. Should the tree be crowned with an angel, reminding us of the role that angels played in the first Christmas? Or should a star have the honored place above all the other ornaments, as it reminds us of the star that led the Magi (or wise men, as they are often called) to baby Jesus? In my family's collection of Christmas decorations, we have both. But over the years the star has become our favorite. No judgment from us if you choose an angel instead!

Although the Magi didn't arrive in time for the first Christmas Eve, the star they followed still reminds us to go to Bethlehem to worship Jesus and offer him our best and most precious gifts.

But can we see a deeper message behind the stars we see each Christmas season? In addition to being a beacon of Jesus' birth, the star reminds us of who Jesus is, what he has accomplished, and the promises he has made.

Recalling a prophecy given by a man famous for his talking donkey, Christmas stars can remind us that we are celebrating the birth of a great King: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:17). Balaam looked ahead through the spirit of prophecy and saw someone who was so awesome and glorious that he could be compared to a star!

In the New Testament the apostle Peter also took up the description of Jesus as a star. He wrote in 2 Peter 1:19, "We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." Clearly, Peter was referring to Jesus' Second Advent. We also note how he too applied the "morning star" metaphor to Jesus. But the essential thought that Peter wanted to impress on us is that through God's Word our faith is sustained and strengthened until we join Jesus in heaven and see his glory forever.

Throughout history the planet Venus has been called the morning star. Although modern astronomy has revealed that it is not a star, we know that it catches and reflects the sun's rays just before dawn. Its light is a sure sign that night is almost over and a new day is about to dawn. Just as a star announced Jesus' birth, Jesus the bright Morning Star announces that the night of sin's power has been broken and will soon be over.

Dear Jesus, may all the stars we see this Advent season encourage us to worship you with the Magi and to offer you gifts of our time, talents, and treasure. And may your name, "bright Morning Star," remind us who you are, what you have done for us, and the future you have promised us. Amen.

Rev. Michael Otterstatter serves Martin Luther College as vice president for mission advancement.

Chief Cornerstone

[You are] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. (Ephesians 2:20)

The cornerstone. The Ephesians had a significant understanding of what that word meant. Their city was home to one of the Seven Ancient Wonders of the World. The temple of Artemis in Ephesus was described as “surpassing all buildings among men.” Standing 60 feet high and with 127 columns, the building was a sight to behold. But sadly that building stood as a monument to an idol, a false god who was no more alive than the stones of the building itself.

So Paul directs their attention to a different stone, a living stone, the chief Cornerstone: Jesus Christ. The firm foundation of this living temple is the teaching of the apostles and prophets. The Old Testament prophets pointed to the coming of the Messiah, Christ. The New Testament apostles pointed back to the Savior, Jesus. Those messengers of God’s Word preached the same message of salvation. Salvation is found in Christ alone. Jesus is the Cornerstone.

As you prepare your heart this Advent season, you might find some other stones there. It’s hard not to get caught up in the busyness of this time of year. It’s maybe even harder not to swallow the poison of the “Christmas spirit” our society pushes. Christmas in America has become the most pagan of Christian festivals. Commercialism hides behind the spirit of charity, good cheer, love, and hope. These things don’t offer true rest on their own. Instead they only add burdens to this time of year. You have to find the perfect gift for each member of your family. Your Christmas dinner needs to be Instagram-worthy. You fret over keeping the peace at your family get-together. All these worries settle like stones in your heart.

Let the jackhammer of God’s Word smash those stones. Christmas isn’t about giving the best gift; God has already given you the perfect gift: his Son, Jesus Christ, and the life and forgiveness that come with him. Every communion Sunday you receive a meal with everlasting importance. The picture of Jesus’ body and blood given for you is more beautiful than any social media post. God adopts you into his family of believers. He designates you for an eternal inheritance. You are part of God’s living temple. He has placed you in alignment with the Cornerstone.

All that remains of the temple of Artemis is ruins. What once stood as a wonder of the world is now crumbled and crushed. Paul pointed the Ephesians to an everlasting building with an eternal architect. Only Jesus will stand the test of time. Everything else will fade. Jesus provides true rest and strength for this season and every other one.

Heavenly Father, crush the stones of idolatry that settle in my heart this time of year. Send your Holy Spirit to prepare my heart for Christ’s second coming, when everything in this world will perish. Help me to put my trust and faith in the eternal Cornerstone that is Jesus Christ. Amen.

Rev. David Starr serves Martin Luther College as an admissions counselor.



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Everlasting Father

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)

Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? Jesus taught his disciples something about prayer with these rhetorical questions recorded in Matthew 7:9-10. As Jesus' disciples, we too hear his words of encouragement to go to our God in prayer in all circumstances. Ask. Seek. Find.

Jesus teaches us something about himself here too. What father wouldn't want to give good gifts to his child? Through the inspiration of the prophet Isaiah, we see "Father" as one of the names of our Savior Jesus. It's not often that we think about Jesus this way. After all, we confess with our mouths even as our human minds fail to fully grasp the complexity of how Jesus is distinct from the first person of the Trinity. Yet we still can call Jesus this powerful name: Everlasting Father.

Jesus has come to give you good things. He came to provide for you, his people, throughout eternity. But as an Everlasting Father he is much more. He is loving and tender, as a father should be. As Jesus walked this earth, he showed time after time his love and compassion for the lowly, the lost, the sick, and the destitute. He was a wise trainer of his people. When his disciples called him, "Rabbi," it was a term of respect, whether they fully grasped how deeply he taught and trained them or not. Jesus acts in that same way for us. He guards his people from all attacks, having crushed the devil, sin, and death.

But Isaiah calls Jesus more than just "Father." He is the Everlasting Father. This name is further proof that the child born in Bethlehem is nothing short of fully God. Only the divine is eternal. Before time even began, Jesus was there with the same characteristics that his name describes. And when his provision, his love, his protection, and his guidance are directed toward us, his people, as part of his name, we know those blessings are ours forever and ever.

This name of Jesus, Everlasting Father, is remarkable in what it describes about him. But it is even more powerful when we realize that Jesus was all of this and yet born in a stable in Bethlehem. Because to provide us with everything we need into eternity and to demonstrate his love in the most vivid way, he had to become like us. He took on human flesh so that he could provide for us—eternally.

Dear Jesus, we thank and praise you for your guidance, protection, and provision. But most of all we thank you for descending to our world to save us and make us your own. Help us to treasure more dearly the gifts that you won for us with your life and death. And give us the confidence to know that the treasures you give us are ours into eternity. Amen.

Rev. Nicolas Schmoller serves Martin Luther College as a professor of theology and Greek.

Faithful and True

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. (Revelation 19:11)

America has had its share of famous generals. Many of them are best known by their nicknames. Do you know the real names of these American generals: Old Blood and Guts, Stonewall, The Bear, Ike?

Here's the name of another famous general: Faithful and True. Do you know his real name? It is Jesus Christ. Though we might not often picture Jesus Christ as a general, this is how he pictures himself in Revelation 19. The apostle John wrote, "I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. . . . The armies of heaven were following him. . . . Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations."

John pictures the Last Day when "Faithful and True" will come again "to judge the living and the dead." What does General Jesus want us to know about him as we live in anticipation of his return? Jesus want us to know this: he is faithful and true to his Word, the "sharp sword" coming "out of his mouth."

That should terrify us. For we have not always been faithful and true parents. Or faithful and true spouses. Or faithful and true friends and neighbors. Or faithful and true students. Or faithful and true employees. But Jesus is, and always has been, faithful and true to his Word. And Jesus did say, "If anyone hears my words but does not keep them, . . . the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day" (John 12). General Jesus was not kidding either. Revelation 19 ends with the sentence, "The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh." Jesus' name—Faithful and True—rightly terrifies unfaithful sinners.

But this same name of Jesus—Faithful and True—is also our greatest comfort as believers. For "if we are faithless, [Jesus] will remain faithful" (2 Timothy 3). True to his Word and faithful to his Father, Jesus took the place of unfaithful sinners under the law and lived perfectly as our substitute. He went to the cross and paid in full the debt we owed God because of our unfaithfulness. True to his Word and faithful to his Father, Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, 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." And so we pray during this Advent season, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus."

Thank you, Jesus, for being perfectly faithful to the truth of your Word and saving me from the guilt of my sin. Help me be faithful and true to you and your Word until you come again to take me home to heaven. Amen.

Rev. James Danell serves Martin Luther College as a professor of German.



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Head of the Church

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:15,16)

It is not uncommon for us to refer to a group of Christians as a “church *body*.” That’s fitting and scriptural. Scripture itself pictures those who trust in Christ as a body. All of us who believe in Christ as our Savior are one body made up of many different parts, each remarkably unique, yet united in one body as we all work together toward one goal: maturity.

And how does that maturity look? Paul described it a few verses earlier: “. . . until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” In order for us to grow up and mature, we need to know Christ and be filled with Christ.

Who is this Christ-Child whose birth we are preparing to celebrate? The truth is, he is God incarnate, born of a virgin human mother and veiled in real human flesh. The truth is, he is love incarnate: born to live and die in our place, to save us from our sins. And Christ accomplished his mission—a truth emphatically underscored when he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, where even now he is seated at the right hand of the Father.

There at the Father’s right hand, “God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be *head* over everything *for the church*, which is his body” (Ephesians 1:22-23). In other words, Jesus—once the Christ-Child—is now the head, the head of the church!

A head wants what is best for its body. So it is with Jesus. He wants what is best for his church. And so he gives us gifts. We know them as called workers: pastors, teachers, staff ministers. They prepare us, God’s people, for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up. They prepare us by speaking to us the truth about Christ in love.

As we grow up in this truth and love, we mature. We progress beyond infant stage where we’re susceptible to every wind of false teaching, and we grow into mature body parts who ourselves are now able to speak the truth in love to others. The more we grow and mature, the healthier the entire body becomes, as each part does its work. And Jesus, our Head, is pleased and praised.

How fitting for such thoughts to be included in a devotional booklet put out by Martin Luther College, our WELS College of Ministry, whose purpose it is to train up future called workers to prepare us all for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.

Dear Jesus, thank you for all the gifts you have given to your church, for called workers who speak the truth to us in love. Bless us as we seek to train up many more! Amen.

Rev. Ross Stelljes serves Martin Luther College as a professor of theology.

Image of the Invisible God

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.
(Colossians 1:15)

Now here is a Christmas gift for all people—we get to see the invisible. From the hardened skeptic to the strongest believer, they all have asked to see God. At Christmas the world finally sees God's great answer to their questions, doubts, and prayers: Jesus in our flesh and blood.

To the cosmonaut who figures that science and technology have put him in a position to know and see all things and asks, "Where is God? I don't see him anywhere."

To the troll and the predator and the average guy who toys with the dark side of the web and asks, "Who's going to know?"

Even mountains are invisible if you keep your eyes closed. The Power and Glory that created all things demanded our worship and holiness on a very visible and loud and shaking mountain. And these demands continue to shake us.

At Christmas the fullness of God was born in human form. In those human cells God chose to show himself and move among us. He walked through our lives perfectly, being what we couldn't, and then he offered that human and divine body on the cross, paying what we couldn't. In Jesus, the image of the invisible God, we see what we are asking for, the perfect life and the complete payment for our sins.

To the traveler who has picked through all the religious writings, sites, and ideas and asks, "Where is God in all this mess? What is God really like?"

To the observer who sees such a sad and cold world all around him and asks, "Is this really all there is to life?"

To the radical who wants to relieve the suffering in the world and says, "I want to see God make a difference in our lives."

At Christmas we see the truth, the life, and the way of God—Jesus. The Son of God quietly lived and taught the people. We have his clear words spoken and recorded. We have his concrete actions to heal and to save. With those instruments of grace, we have a new life to live and to give to others.

To the one hurting who has looked to the hills but has seen no help coming . . . To the parents and spouses who want their families to see what's invisible, to see saints taking care of them . . .

To the child and the child-like who ask at the end of the day, "Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask thee to stay / Close by me forever and love me, I pray" . . . At Christmas we see the wonderful invisible God.

"God's love made visible! Incomprehensible! Christ is invincible! His love shall reign!" Amen. (Song by David and Iola Brubeck)

Rev. Brian Dose serves Martin Luther College as a professor of English.



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Immanuel

DECEMBER 8

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

Seven hundred years before Isaiah, God instructed Moses to build a tabernacle and place it in the *middle* of Israel's camp. Not hidden. Not on the outskirts. Rather, right in the middle. It was an object lesson for a truth God wished to teach, namely, that he is not a God who is far away, but one who is pleased to dwell right in the middle of his people.

The Old Testament believers took great comfort in this truth as they marched toward the Promised Land. In the tent, in the cloud of fire and smoke, God was with them—right in their midst—as they waited for the fulfillment of his promises. Years later, God also located both the tabernacle and temple roughly in the middle of the land. He had the same message in mind: *Immanu-el*: “*With us-God!*” The psalmist also drew courage as he thought about all Israel's enemies. Even as they attacked the city of God, Jerusalem, “God is within her, she will not fall” (Psalm 46:5).

Yet on an even greater level, the placement of the tabernacle in the middle of Israel's camp was a visual prophecy of the truth Isaiah proclaimed to King Ahaz. God one day would come in a very special way right into the middle of his people. He would come in the person of his own Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, born of a virgin. St. John explained the mystery of Jesus' incarnation in terms of the tabernacle: “The Word became flesh and *tented* among us,” as the Greek of John 1:14 says. Jesus came right into the middle of his people to do those things that only God can do: help, heal, teach, restore, suffer, die, rise, ascend. He did all those things for us and for our salvation. And he, who still has flesh and blood like us, is our brother, sitting at God's right hand and waiting—eagerly waiting—for the Father's signal to descend once more and make all things new.

Until then, though, we still are blessed to have *Immanu-el*: “*With us-God!*” He is with us in the Spirit's Word, in the Father's baptismal water of adoption. He is with us in bread and wine, our Savior's true body and blood. He is with us now and to the very end of the age.

May this assurance lead us, in turn, to live in Advent faith with the same joy and confidence the psalmist had: “Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory” (Psalm 73:23-24).

Be with us, Lord, in your Word and sacraments, until our desert trek is done and we reach home with you forever. Amen.

Dr. Keith Wessel serves Martin Luther College as a professor of Latin and Greek.

Jesus

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. (Matthew 1:21)

“Jesus is the reason for the season!” Is this phrase merely an empty slogan or is it a concise statement of fact?

For many people the phrase is merely an empty slogan. Yes, they know that Jesus is the reason for the season. After all, Christmas is a celebration of his birth. But that is about as far as it goes. They do not really know who Jesus is or what his birth means for them. For some, Jesus’ birth is nothing more than a myth, something on a par with Santa Claus and his magical reindeer. After all, virgins do not have children. For others, Jesus was an ordinary human being, someone whose followers made him into something he never intended, someone whose teachings upset the religious establishment and resulted in his premature death.

However, for you and me and our fellow Christians, the phrase is not merely an empty slogan. It is a concise statement of fact. By God’s grace, we know who Jesus is and why he is the reason for the season. We know from the pages of the Holy Bible that Jesus is the God-Man, the Son of God and the Son of Mary. We know that he came into this world “to save his people from their sins.” In fact, that is why he was called Jesus, a name that means “Savior.”

Do you remember the setting in which those words were first spoken? Joseph and Mary were pledged to be married. For the Jews, this pledge was legally binding and could only be broken by divorce. When it became obvious that Mary was expecting a baby, Joseph drew the only conclusion humanly possible: Mary had been unfaithful. Because Joseph was a just man, he did not want to make a public spectacle, so he planned to divorce Mary quietly. But God graciously intervened. He sent an angel to Joseph in a dream. The angel told Joseph that Mary had not been unfaithful. Instead, the baby she was carrying had been conceived by the Holy Spirit and was going to save his people from their sins, just as the Old Testament had prophesied.

What a relief this must have been for Joseph! What an even greater relief this is for you and me! We have a Savior, someone whose life, death, and resurrection took care of our sin, won God’s favor for us, and secured a place for us in heaven.

Lord Jesus, you are truly the reason for the season! Thank you for revealing this truth to us in your holy Word. Amen.

Rev. John Schmidt serves Martin Luther College as a professor of theology and Greek.

King of Kings and Lord of Lords

On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: King of kings and Lord of lords. (Revelation 19:16)

Do you recall when as a child you first learned the concept of the echo? You shouted in the canyon or the tunnel, “HELLO!” and then just seconds later a softer and more distant chorus began, each shout a little less intense than the preceding one: “HELLO! Hello! hello!”

Whoa! In contrast to the echoes you have experienced before, the chorus of this text is totally different. You’ve never heard the echo resound so clearly or with so much volume as it does this time. Instead of fading away, this echo’s refrain is building, BUILDING, **BUILDING** in intensity, and the crescendo forges upward and onward . . .

What becomes even more fascinating to you is that you recognize the words: “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.” You can’t help but be reminded that you have heard these words, or very similar words, before, as you read and studied the Bible. The pagan King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, with an ego the size of the Grand Canyon, had to acknowledge to his servant of the exile named Daniel, “Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings” (Daniel 2:47). God’s great servant and leader Moses also comes to mind as he chimes in with the same message to the people: “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords” (Deuteronomy 10:17).

Now in our text, John records for us not only the visions of heaven, but the sounds he hears as well. He sees a rider on a white horse, sitting victoriously on his mount. He wears many crowns. These are crowns that he has taken from his conquered enemies, as well as crowns that his subjects have willingly given to him in adoration and thanks. The rider is dressed in a white robe stained with the blood of the enemies he has conquered. His people sing his praises as the King’s own blood has given them the victory over sin, death, and the devil.

“King of kings and Lord of lords!” Then louder: “**King of kings and Lord of lords!**” Then again and again and again, louder and LOUDER and LOUDER, “**KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS!**” This is your King. He led you into battle against sin and death by becoming sin for you and dying in your place. He gave you the victory over death, with his own resurrection the guarantee that you too will rise. This is your LORD and all that saving name offers.

“KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS!” This is the echoing sound of all God’s people joining in the heavenly victory song that praises our Savior’s name.

Dear Lord Jesus, your name is indeed a name above all other names because you are indeed Lord of lords and King of kings. Live and reign in our hearts and minds during this season in which we prepare to celebrate your birth and look forward to your coming again. Amen.

Rev. Doug Lange serves Martin Luther College as a professor of physical education.

Lamb of God

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. (1 Corinthians 5:7)

What comes to mind when you hear of someone who makes a sacrifice? Perhaps a parent sacrifices an hour of time at the office to play catch, shoot hoops, read a book, or play a game with their child. How many of us have sacrificed some sweat energy to help a friend or co-worker move into a new house or apartment? Have you ever sacrificed some money to pay for the coffee of the person behind you in the drive-thru? Commendable, right?

Sacrifice. I looked this word up on Merriam-Webster.com, and I found references to

- a) an act of offering to a deity something precious, especially the killing of a victim on an altar; and
- b) the destruction or surrender of something for the sake of something else; and finally
- c) something given up or lost.

Certainly, this last definition fits the examples mentioned above quite well. Who of us at some point in time has not been willing to give up some of our time, energy, or money to help a family member, a friend, or even a stranger?

When it comes to Jesus being the Lamb of God, no definition could be more accurate than the first two on the list. What's more, no fact could be truer in that we need that Lamb and his sacrifice! In an act of perfect love, our heavenly Father offered up the life of his one and only Son—perfect and innocent though he was—as the one-time payment for all sin. For our sins, yours and mine. He brought destruction to the earthly body of Jesus for our sake. What's more, Jesus the Lamb of God freely and willingly surrendered his life in the name of this sacrifice, and it dealt a crushing blow to Satan's plans to drag us down into his pit of destruction.

As each new church year begins with the season of Advent (defined as the "coming" or "arrival" of something notable), we remember the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, who came to take our sins away, and who will come again to take us into glory. Just as in the Old Testament, believers painted a Passover lamb's blood on their doorframes, so our New Testament Passover Lamb's blood covers our hearts, reminding us of the perfection he won on the cross on our behalf.

Now we worship this lamb in thanksgiving for his unmatched and undeserved love and gifts to us! For this Lamb is worthy of our "praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (Revelation 5:13)

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world. Have mercy on us. Grant us your peace. Amen.

Dr. Jeff Wiechman serves Martin Luther College as vice president for academics.



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Lion of Judah

DECEMBER 12

Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.” (Revelation 5:5)

Things did not look good as the end of the first century approached. The church was under attack: believers were being persecuted, and false teachers were pulling them away from the truth. In that kind of a situation, then and now, Christians may wonder what the future might hold. Is God still seated on the throne of the universe? If he is, why is everything spinning out of control? Why does it seem as chaotic as feeding time at the zoo? Are we the menu?

The apostle John himself had experienced suffering; he had been exiled to the island of Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Revelation 1:9). However, God allowed John to see behind the curtain of current events with powerful visions that changed his perspective, and he was given messages of encouragement to pass along to the suffering church.

In Revelation 5, John sees that God has a scroll in his hand, written on both sides, which must have included some of those messages. But the scroll is sealed, and no one is found worthy to open the scroll and reveal the future. That moves John to tears—he “wept and wept” (v. 4)—until he hears this: “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”

There is one who is worthy: “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David.” Those were familiar titles for the Messiah, the promised Savior, from the Old Testament (Genesis 49:8-11; Isaiah 11:1,10; Jeremiah 23:5). In Jewish literature from this same time, the figure of a lion was used to designate the conquering Messiah who would destroy Rome. They had it half-right. Jesus Christ was the conquering Messiah, but he had far more powerful enemies to destroy than imperial Rome. As Luther put it in his explanation to the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed, “He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.”

From our vantage point in salvation history, we look back and see that Jesus was—and is!—the mighty Messiah, prophesied centuries earlier, who has won the victory. He has conquered his foes, he is completely triumphant, and his victory is once and for all.

The first century and the twenty-first century have much in common. If things in your life feel as if they are spinning out of control and you are wondering what the future holds, remember this: The Lion has roared.

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever! Amen.”

Dr. Lawrence Olson serves Martin Luther College as director of the staff ministry program and the congregational assistant program.

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)

It's that time of year again, at least for many of us. Daylight Savings Time is over, and we've turned our clocks back. That means that the light starts to fade an hour earlier than in the summer. Add to that the changing seasons, and the result is that by 5:00 it's dark outside. Many of us leave home in the dark and return in the dark. We begin to crave daylight.

That craving is not just psychological. We need light. We need light for more than vision, though vision is a treasured blessing. We are "wired" to be in the light. Our biological rhythms are governed by light. Brain chemistry responds to light and the absence of it. Moods and health react to light or the lack of it. Recall the ten plagues that the Lord sent onto Egypt. Three days of total darkness was one of those plagues. Total perpetual darkness is not natural for us; it is terrifying.

Our text names Jesus as a "light for the Gentiles." Light serves to illuminate. Light may show us the path to take, figuratively or literally. Light shining in a dark place draws our attention and draws us in. When my feeble brain finally grasps a difficult concept, I remark that the "light finally came on." Surely Jesus is all this for us. He shows us the path. He enlightens my sin-darkened mind and soul. He is the gleaming focal point in a dark world.

But Jesus is much more than that. Jesus doesn't just illuminate the way; he *is* the way. Jesus doesn't just enlighten life; he *is* my life. Just as we crave light for physical and emotional health, my soul craves Jesus for my spiritual health, and deeper still, my spiritual life.

My sinful nature hates the light. Light lays bare my sin. It leaves no shadow in which to hide. My sinful nature prefers the dark. Many in our world are living in the dark. Isn't it ironic that those who choose to live in the dark call themselves enlightened? They are grateful to be free of ancient myths and pathetic restrictions that shackle their minds, limit their self-expression, and weigh them down with useless, outdated morals.

How desperately we need the Light that is Christ! Through his gospel, Christ beams his dazzling light of love and grace into the inky blackness of my sin-filled heart. The light of Christ's love transforms my sinful heart and lays bare the lies of the dark. He makes me his own and promises that the eternal light of his presence is awaiting me in heaven.

Even the most glorious sunrise on Earth can't compare with the light that my Savior has placed in me.

Dear Lord, shine your love, grace, mercy, and peace into my heart and soul. Drive the darkness away. Finally, bring me into the everlasting Light that awaits me in heaven. We pray in Jesus' name, who is the true Light of the world. Amen.

Dan Fenske serves Martin Luther College as a professor of science.



MARTIN LUTHER COLLEGE

LORD

Lord

DECEMBER 14

"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." (Luke 2:11)

Just what was on the minds and hearts of the shepherds as they heard the angel tell them this amazing news? With each description and name given to them, a bolt of adrenaline may have pierced through their bodies. Three separate shocks of excitement, one more powerful than the next. This baby born in Bethlehem is a Savior. They can feel their hearts racing. This baby born to you is the Messiah. They can't take this excitement. This is the one who was going to deliver them! But perhaps no other name could give them any more shock, wonder, and excitement than what was going to come out of the angel's mouth next: This baby is the LORD.

It almost seems as if the angel says this name in passing. "He is the Messiah—oh wait, that's right—he is also the LORD." But that seemingly little add-on is not so little when you think of the implications the name brought into the minds of the shepherds. This isn't just a lord. This is the LORD, Yahweh, Jehovah—a name that every Jewish person held in the highest regard, because when this name was written in Scripture, you knew it was God speaking and acting for the good of his people. It was the LORD who promised Abraham that he would become a great nation and all other nations on earth would be blessed through him. It was the LORD who divided the waters of the Red Sea and led his people out of Egypt. It was the LORD whom David cited as the shepherd who leads him beside quiet waters. It was the LORD who brought on the rise and fall of nations and amidst it all preserved his plan of salvation.

When hearing the name LORD, there was one thing that was going through the hearts and minds of the shepherds: peace. Peace, because the baby they were going to see was their God. He was their LORD and God not just in that moment, but long before they were even born, before the creation of the world.

As you hear the words of the angel, the same thing can be running through your mind: peace. You have peace in this world because the LORD, true God from all eternity, chose to take on human flesh to deliver you from all the things in your life that try to rob you of that peace. You have peace because this baby is the LORD, who since the beginning of time has shown his free and faithful love to his people. You have peace because this child gives you the reason to praise him as the LORD that he is.

Dear LORD God, you are our LORD. As you've been the LORD to your people since the beginning of creation, continue to be our God of free and faithful love this Christmas season and throughout our lives. Amen.

Rev. Paul Koester serves Martin Luther College as an instructor and dormitory supervisor.

Messenger of the Covenant

"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. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. (Malachi 3:1-2)

As you read your Bible, what is your reaction to God's miracles in the past? Do you say to yourself wistfully, "Those were the days"? And does wistfulness ever turn into complaining? "Life would be a lot easier, God, if you would miraculously solve my problems. You came through with some amazing help in the distant past—why not now?"

The people of Judah in Malachi's day were in that kind of a slump. They recalled longingly what God had done a thousand years earlier. He had delivered the Israelites from Egypt with astonishing miracles. Because he wanted to make a covenant with them, he had even revealed himself as a special Angel, which can be translated as Messenger. God had come in that form to protect and bless his people.

Those memories turned into complaints: "Where is the God of justice now? The wicked seem to flourish; serving God gets us nowhere. A heathen empire rules over us. Where is that Angel, that Messenger of the covenant, who helped Israel long ago? We could use some miracles like that now."

God answered them by sending Malachi with a message. Yes, God would come to his temple. He would do so in the person of his Son, Jesus. He is the "Angel," the "Messenger of the covenant," whom they desired. But he would come on his terms, not theirs.

They were not ready for God to come because they didn't see the real problem. They blamed their heathen oppressors. They criticized God for not doing enough for them. But they didn't see how far their own hearts and lives were from God's will for them. In his holiness he would come to them like a refiner's fire separating impurities from molten metal, like caustic soap purging away filth. In their current condition they would be banished from his presence like so much dirt.

So before sending Jesus as the Angel, or Messenger, of the covenant, God sent a different messenger, John the Baptist, to prepare the way before Jesus. John told all who heard him to repent in preparation for the Lord's coming.

We too are to repent. When Jesus returns, he will judge the world. Let us not imagine that there is nothing in us for him to judge. God wants us to look in the mirror. If we are pleased with ourselves and want to continue our familiar sins or try out new ones, we will not "endure the day of his coming." But if we continually repent of our sins and trust Jesus to cleanse us and direct our lives, we will be his living temple, and the Lord will come to his temple and dwell with us in joy and glory forever.

Change us, Lord Jesus, in our hearts and lives. Renew us as your holy temple through faith, so that we may endure the day of your coming and live with you forever. Amen.

Rev. Joel Fredrich serves Martin Luther College as a professor of theology, Latin, and Greek.



MARTIN LUTHER COLLEGE

Messiah

DECEMBER 16

The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ). (John 1:41)

We believe that Jesus is going to return on the Last Day, but do you truly believe that it could happen in *your* lifetime? Or do you think that it will happen, but sometime after you have died?

Old Testament Christians at the time of Jesus believed that God would one day send a promised Messiah, but did they truly believe that it could happen during their lifetime? So many generations had come and gone without the appearance of the promised Messiah. Would their answer to the question, “Will he return during *your* lifetime?” be answered with, “Probably not”?

And yet our text tells us that Andrew found his brother Simon and said with absolute certainty, “We have found the Messiah!” How did Andrew overcome the natural pessimism that would creep in over the many years of the intertestamental period of silence?

The short answer would be that the same Holy Spirit who worked faith in Andrew’s heart to believe in the promise of a Savior also led him to truly believe that Jesus in their midst was the promised Messiah.

And Scripture also shares with us details of *how* the Holy Spirit worked.

Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist. As John preached, Andrew repented of his sins and looked to the promised Messiah for forgiveness.

When Jesus came to be baptized, John recognized Jesus as the Messiah, baptized him, and received confirmation from both the Father and the Holy Spirit that this was the very Son of God. John shared this event with his disciples, saying, “He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’”

One day as John the Baptist and Andrew were talking, Jesus walked by. John said to Andrew, “Behold, the Lamb of God!”

Through all of this, the Holy Spirit worked in the heart of Andrew a certain faith that this Jesus was the promised Messiah.

At this Christmastime, may your faith in Jesus as your promised Messiah be strengthened and confirmed by these accounts recorded in Holy Scripture. We, who need to hear John the Baptist’s message of repentance, also turn to Jesus for forgiveness, as Andrew did, and we have the same confidence: “We have found the Messiah!”

Dear Savior, as we, with Andrew of old, are weighed down by our sins, let us with Andrew be confident that our sins are all forgiven; that when we look to Jesus, we are certain that “We have found the Messiah!” Amen.

David Bauer serves Martin Luther College as a professor of music.

Mighty God

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)

And his name shall be called Mighty God. You heard that right. Not Lucas, Mason, or Oliver, but . . . Mighty God! That's quite a name for a baby. Imagine seeing a friend's Facebook post with a photograph of her newborn son and the details of his birth: "Born December 22, 2018, 7 lbs. 6 oz." And his name? "Mighty God." But for the newborn babe in Bethlehem it is a name that fits.

Is there anywhere in Scripture a more explicit statement of the divinity of Christ? Perhaps one that is equal is found in Psalm 45, where Christ is described with the same word: "Gird your sword on your side, you mighty one; clothe yourself with splendor and majesty . . . Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom." Jesus himself is the mighty God—come in the flesh, even as a baby, as a child. With this we are reminded of what Scripture tells us in John 1:1, ". . . and the Word was God." And then in verse 14 that "the Word became flesh."

Jesus' mighty power was on display not only at his birth, but through his entire time on earth. At the beginning of his ministry, it was revealed in his teachings. We are told that the crowds that heard Jesus were attentive because "He taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matthew 7:29). He knew the people's hearts. When Jesus spoke, people listened, and they felt God's Spirit burn within them.

He clearly demonstrated his power also through his miracles and healings. Blind people received their sight. Disabled people walked, dead people came back to life, and diseased people were made well. The miracles of Jesus validated the name "Mighty God."

Jesus showed that he was Mighty God by the way he endured temptation. The writer to the Hebrews writes: "We have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (Hebrews 4:15). In times of temptation, we see how strong a person is. Our Savior met trials and opposition from Satan and our wicked, fallen world head on and never succumbed. The Mighty God could not and did not sin.

We see Jesus's power in his death and resurrection. He endured the ridicule, the pain, the betrayal of friends, and he bore the enormous weight of our sins on the cross. With the words "It is finished," Jesus even decided the moment he would die. In his resurrection and ascension, we see the victory won on our behalf and our home in heaven reserved. Jesus proved to all creation that he was what Scripture said he was in his birth announcement: Mighty God!

Lord Jesus, thank you for coming to this earth to be my Mighty God and to rescue me from sin, death, and the power of the devil. I look forward to the day when you will return to take me to yourself in heaven. Amen.

Scott Schmudlach serves Martin Luther College as vice president for administration.



MARTIN LUTHER COLLEGE

Prince of Peace

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)

A favorite Christmas hymn says, “Hail, the heavenly Prince of Peace!” Peace. Peace is knowing that everything is the way it should be between you and God. Everything is just right in life because you know that God is not at war with you anymore. Christmas is all about peace.

“Orsvr.” Do you know what that word is? It’s an attempt at spelling out “peace.” It’s what letters come onto the screen when typing the word “peace” with your fingers just one letter off of home row on the computer. My fingers made all the right motions; they just weren’t grounded in the right spot. So close, yet so far away from “peace.”

Two thousand years ago, a child was born who seemed to change everything. That child’s name was Caesar Augustus. Augustus ended wars and built roads, and by the time he died, Rome had peace and everyone worshiped him as god. It looked like peace, but it didn’t solve the real problem of life: sin. So close, yet so far away from “peace.”

Have you ever noticed the world’s opinions on where to find peace at Christmas? Sometimes we even buy in. We hear, “Christmas is all about family and being together” or “Christmas is about doing good to others.” Those are wonderful things and gifts from God to be thankful for, but if we are not grounded in the right spot, “peace” is always going to sound more like “Orsvr.” So close, yet so far away from true “peace.”

Christmas is all about peace. But it’s not something you need to do, or something you need to hope will still happen. Christmas is all about recognizing the peace that you already have. It’s listening to what the angel told the frightened shepherds that first night—a message meant just for them and now just for you: “Today, in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord!” Shepherds, this is how much your God loves you! The one who lifted the stars into the sky made himself so weak that he could not even lift his own head. And why? So that the palm that held the universe could take the nail of a soldier one day.

Suddenly the skies lit up like the Son as the angels could not hold back from screaming out what it all means: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth . . . peace.” Dear friends, Jesus is your home row. Only by starting with him can you spell “peace” in your life. That’s what Christmas is all about. That’s what makes Christmas merry. Hark! The herald angels sing: your peace is here!

Dear Jesus, you are the Prince of Peace. This Advent, keep me grounded in what brings me true peace: the fact that you came to earth to bring peace between God and me. Fill my heart with that peace so that others may see the true meaning of Christmas through me. Amen.

Rev. David Scharf serves Martin Luther College as a professor of theology.

Prophet

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

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. (Deuteronomy 18:15)

Moses was "the Man." He faced down Pharaoh and guided a miraculous exodus from Egyptian slavery. He led that mass migration on a long journey through the desert. He communicated directly with God. And God used Moses to bring his words, commands, and promises directly to his people—for the first time written down for generations to read and hear.

"Tell them," God instructed Moses. Tell them: "You shall have no other gods." Tell them: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." Tell them: "You shall not commit adultery." Tell them: "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." Those, of course, are just four of the Ten Commandments that revealed God's enduring moral will. Moses also wrote down the civil and ceremonial laws: property regulations, personal injury policies, worship guidelines. The laws revealed God's holiness. They kept his chosen people separate from the pagan peoples around them. God told Moses: "Although the whole earth is mine, you will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 18). God warned that disobeying the covenant given through Moses would have serious consequences.

Moses understood that the divine instruction he communicated could not provide a permanent solution for the problems that sin brought into this world. The focus needed to be on the promises given to Adam and to Abraham—of a Savior who would live in righteousness. In other words, Moses was not the last word. Moses himself said that God would raise up another prophet. He then added, "You must listen to him."

For centuries after Moses' death, the Jewish people longed for his legendary leadership. They awaited the coming of the "prophet like Moses." Could Jesus of Nazareth be the Prophet, they wondered. After he miraculously fed more than 5,000 people with a few fish and loaves of bread, many people thought so. However, in time, many became dissatisfied. Jesus simply was not another Moses.

They missed the point. The prophet to come, Moses explained, would speak a better word than he did. About this verse, Martin Luther wrote: "When [Moses] says, 'Listen to him who will be raised up like me,' he teaches plainly that his own word is different from the Word of the Prophet. . . . if there were not another word, there would be no need to promise that it will be brought by this Prophet" (LW 9:176).

Jesus, the Prophet, proclaimed the better word of the gospel. His life's work was "to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (John 5). Jesus kept the law of Moses in all that he thought and said and did. Jesus finished his work when God's justice and God's grace met in the beams of the cross.

**My soul, no more attempt to draw your life and comfort from the law.
Flee to the hope the gospel gives; the one who trusts the promise lives. Amen.**
(CW 286:4)

Rev. Paul Koelpin serves Martin Luther College as a professor of history and theology.



MARTIN LUTHER COLLEGE

Redeemer

DECEMBER 20

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.
(Job 19:25)

A common use of the word *redeem* involves coupons or gift certificates. It may be a code, card, or piece of paper that entitles the person that presents it a specific item. If the merchandise has great value, it's more likely that there can only be one exchange. The prize or gift is free to the recipient, but unless exchanged at the correct place and time, it has no monetary value. Often there's an expiration date and sometimes a statement of the actual cash value.

The word *redeemer* occurs in the Bible to describe an exchange in the familiar story of Ruth, a widow from Moab. Boaz served as Ruth's kinsman-redeemer. As the closest relative of her deceased husband, he married Ruth to keep the family line intact. In a practical sense, he used his earthly gifts to save Ruth and Naomi from poverty.

We find the account of Job containing the term *redeemer* as well. Job was a believer blessed with great wealth, a large family, and dedicated friends. We see Job much like Ruth was, without any earthly goods and with only one surviving family member. Unlike Ruth, the friends of Job were still with him, and in the previous chapters they had tried to share in his sorrow and pain. They sat with him in the dust and ashes for days, not saying anything. When they did speak, they tried to make sense of Job's misery. In turn, his three friends each concluded that Job had committed some particular sin or sins that brought God's punishment on him.

From the beginning of his struggles, Job displayed humble faith in God's promises. In 1:21 he declared, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, may the name of the Lord be praised." After his friend's accusation of wrongdoing, Job again displayed his faith in the Saving God: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth!" This bold statement of belief demonstrates confidence in God's power and promises.

We share that same faith. Living after Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, though, we can call our Savior by name. While Job said *Redeemer*, we call on him as Jesus, the Christ, descendent of Ruth and Boaz. Jesus lives and rules eternally in heaven and earth. Jesus gave his life—once, freely, for all. He brought us into his family—and redeemed us from eternal suffering to eternal glory!

He lives, all glory to his name! He lives, my Jesus, still the same.
Oh, the sweet joy this sentence gives: I know that my Redeemer lives!
(CW 152:8)

Greg Diersen serves Martin Luther College as a professor of math and science.

Savior

And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. (1 John 4:14)

What is the best Christmas gift you ever received? Some people might find that question difficult to answer since they have received so many gifts over the years. God's children, however, know just how to respond. We know one gift will always remain the best, regardless of how many Christmases we celebrate. We know it to be the best because of who sent it and what it provides.

Our lesson tells us "the Father has sent" the best Christmas gift to us. We all have received impractical Christmas gifts that sit in closets or wind up at rummage sales. Not so with our heavenly Father's gift because "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights" (James 1:17).

"What's that?" you might say. "How can you say God has given his best when there are so many conflicts in the world, at work, or in the home? How can you say God has given his best when I struggle so much with temptation each day and carry a great deal of guilt because of succumbing to it? How can you say God has given me his very best when I have lost so much—a loved one in death, my health, my friend, my job, my savings?"

We can say God has given us the perfect gift because he addressed the root problem of all these other troubles. Instead of just treating all these symptoms, he decided to save us from the disease. Sin has infected us all since the day we were born. Through one man, Adam, sin entered the world—as well as death and all the other sorrows of life. God in his love chose to rescue us from our sin and its consequences.

John says in our lesson, "The Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world." God sent his Son to be born of a virgin—to take on our flesh and blood, our issues, our struggles, our sorrows, our temptations. He took them all on for us, and not once did he give in to temptation.

Then Jesus gave us his very best. He took all our sins to the cross of Calvary. On that cross, he removed our sins from us forever. On that cross, he endured the punishment we deserved. From his tomb, he rose to secure complete deliverance from sin, death, and the devil for all.

When we open our Christmas gifts this year, it will not matter which of them we will remember. What greater gift could we possibly receive than the one sent by the heavenly Father—our Savior from sin, Christ the Lord! "Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!" (2 Corinthians 9:15)

O Lord, we thank you for sending your Son to save us from sin and death. Through your Word, give us the strength to cherish and share this indescribable gift with the world. Amen.

Rev. Brian Hennig serves Martin Luther College as a professor of history and theology.



MARTIN LUTHER COLLEGE

Shepherd

DECEMBER 22

For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Peter 2:25)

To whom do you belong? Does that question bother you? Do you wish to maintain your autonomy, to answer to no one except self? Well, such a life is not as enjoyable as it might sound. And it doesn't end well.

The Bible compares people to sheep. Sheep do not do well on their own. They do not thrive without someone to guide and protect them. Sheep lack a sense of direction. Their predators are faster than they are. Without a guide and protector, sheep are defenseless, destined to a short life.

Chances are that if you are reading this, you already know this. Even if your experience with sheep begins and ends with a petting zoo, you know how desperately sheep need a shepherd. The Holy Spirit loves to use this image to describe our need for Jesus, the "Shepherd and Overseer of our souls."

A congregation member came to me with a troubling question. He did not enjoy worship anymore. He did not get excited about church. He felt like he was hearing the same old stuff he had been hearing for years.

What would you say to him? Jesus said, "My sheep listen to my voice." In ancient pastures, the shepherd's voice got the sheep's attention. His voice warned them against danger, directed them along difficult paths, and reassured them in times of trouble.

There is a part of us, the sinful part of us, that does not want to listen to Jesus. We might be faithful in worship. However, we are also able to turn a deaf ear when we want to. We might be distracted by the world, discontented with God's ways, or desperate to defend a sinful habit.

A couple of teenage girls saw the movie *The Passion of the Christ*. Before it began, they were giggling—like teenage girls. As the images of Jesus' suffering flashed across the screen, giggles turned to silence and then tears. "Jesus, I'm sorry," one of them said.

We are too. For ignoring Jesus' voice, we should suffer in silence for eternity. But our Good Shepherd loved us too much. "I lay down my life for the sheep—only to take it up again." What comforting words. Payment made. Our Savior, our Shepherd, promises, "I give you eternal life and you shall never perish. No one can snatch you out of my hand."

Will you be without loved ones this holiday season? Will you be struggling with illness or discouragement? Will you feel the pressure to make the holiday season great? You are not alone. You are not on your own. Read John 10, a great chapter about a good shepherd. Listen to his voice comfort and strengthen you.

**Jesus, Shepherd of the sheep, Who your Father's flock does keep,
Safe we wake and safe we sleep, Guarded still by you.
In your promise firm we stand; None can take us from your hand.
Speak—we hear—at your command, We will follow you. Amen.**

Rev. John Boeder serves Martin Luther College as campus pastor.

Son of God

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." (Luke 1:35)

The movie *Son of God* appeared in theaters in 2014. Curious to see what the writers would do with the biblical storyline, my wife and I ventured out to our local theater on a cold, wintry night. As expected, the screenwriters injected much non-biblical material into the movie. That is bound to happen when the final product is a movie that runs for more than two hours. There were chronological errors and failures to include noteworthy sayings of Jesus, but the most surprising and ironic omission was the confession of the Roman centurion and his soldiers: "Surely he was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54) That accurate statement about Jesus at his death—reflected in the title of the movie—was conspicuously missing. That truthful statement about Jesus was *not* absent when his earthly life was about to begin.

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and informed her that she was going to give birth to a child, he explained the manner in which she would conceive: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." No man would be involved in Jesus' conception. He would be "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary," as Christians confess in the Apostles' Creed. That meant that the sinless Son of God could become a human being without a sinful nature that is passed on from parents to children. That meant that "the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

Jesus' incarnation is what makes our Advent preparations and Christmas celebrations significant. We focus our attention on the remarkable truth that the Son of God became one of us to save us from our sins. The Son of God became a little child so he could go through life as our perfect substitute and die as our innocent substitute. The child in the manger whom we see with the eyes of faith is "true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary," as Martin Luther penned in his explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed.

If the child who is the subject of Christmas celebrations throughout the world was only a human being who lived some 2,000 years ago, then there is no reason for our Advent preparations and Christmas celebrations. But since December 25 is all about the entrance of the Son of God into his world as a child, let the Advent preparations continue! Let our Christmas celebration be this: "Beautiful Savior, Lord of the nations, Son of God and Son of Man! Glory and honor, Praise, adoration Now and forevermore be thine!" (CW 369:4)

Lord Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man, receive my praise now and always for becoming man and rescuing me from my sins. Keep me focused on you in these busy days of Advent and every season of life. Amen.

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Wonderful Counselor

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)

In our society, counselors are trained chiefly to be listeners. They listen and distill their clients' thinking and feelings. They listen and reflect back the understanding clients reveal. They listen and clarify to help clients discover for themselves what is helpful for their lives.

Counselors are trained not to insert themselves into the process, not to be intrusive or directive, not to give advice—but to enable clients to find their own sensible solutions for life. Often the counselor's goal is to help clients figure out what they must do on their own, how they must change in order to improve their life and circumstances.

Let's take care not to impose this contemporary understanding of counseling upon Isaiah as he calls the Messiah a Wonderful Counselor. He wasn't describing the Messiah as some sort of super-counselor come to help us cut through the disabling fog of our own psycho-emotional distress. He wasn't describing the Messiah's goal as helping us unload all the debilitating baggage inherited from our family-of-origin. He wasn't coming to help us help ourselves.

Literally, Isaiah names Jesus a "Wonder who counsels." In the language of Isaiah, Jesus is our Wonderful Counselor because the counsel he speaks to us is a wonder, a miracle, the miraculous counsel that only a gracious God could give.

- Counselor Jesus wasn't coming to empathize with us, but to identify with us in the most intimate and amazing way by taking on our very nature, becoming fully human, our true Brother. What a wonder!
- Counselor Jesus wasn't coming to help us discover how we could help ourselves; rather, he was going to act on our behalf and so help us in our sinful helplessness. What a wonder!
- Counselor Jesus wasn't simply going to enable us to understand our sin, but to take our sin onto himself and pay for it with his own life. What a wonder!
- Counselor Jesus wasn't going to help us change ourselves; he was going to change our status before the holy God. Jesus' bloody cross and empty tomb prove that we are holy, perfect, and righteous in God's eyes. What a wonder!
- Counselor Jesus wasn't coming to teach us coping skills; Jesus promises to live in us and so enliven us to live beautiful lives of love. What a wonder!

In his person and his saving work, Jesus is God's Word of counsel to sinful, dying ears. In his own words, written in Scripture, Jesus counsels sinners to put their hope in him who died for them and rose again. In the ministry of his church of believers, Jesus continues to counsel all who will hear with the powerful gospel: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life." What a wonder! What a Wonderful Counselor!

Though my ears are slow to listen and my heart is slow to hear, please keep speaking to me, counseling me to repent and believe the good news, and so live a joyful life with you. Amen.

Rev. Jeff Schone serves Martin Luther College as vice president for student life.

Word

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1,14)

For months now, Psalm 12:6 has been my desktop background. At the end of the day, I close the apps I used, the documents I opened, and the internet tabs that wasted my time. The words I used that day disappear into a file on my hard drive, and Psalm 12:6 is the last thing left on my screen: “The words of the Lord are flawless, like silver purified in a crucible, like gold refined seven times.”

Psalm 12:6 is a profound statement to read after spending an entire day communicating with words. If it is a typical day, I spent time in a meeting and said blunt words that were far from flawless. If it is a typical day, I also spent time in a classroom and taught with stuttering words that were far from flawless. If it is a typical day, I talked on the phone with hurtful words that were far from flawless. In your typical day, are your words purified like silver? Are they refined like gold? Maybe, in your typical day, your words are like the typical person’s. Blunt. Stuttering. Hurtful.

At the end of the day, it is nice to close down the conversations you messed up, the arguments you opened, and your broken communications that wasted everyone’s time. It is good to close the book on your flawed word and read about God’s flawless Word. It is good to read about the Word, Jesus Christ, and his glorious, flawless life. In your reading you have seen his glory—almost as if his life has been purified in a crucible and refined seven times. You have read about the flawless Word who is full of grace and is the image of the invisible, gracious God (Colossians 1:15). You have read and seen the glory of the flawless Word who is full of truth and acts as the Church’s head (Ephesians 4:15,16). You have seen the glory of God’s only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Psalm 12 shows that the Lord’s written words are flawless. John 1 shows that the Lord’s living Word is flawless as well. God has piled perfection on top of perfection. He has shown you his perfect Word and his perfect Son. God has given you that perfection through the flawless Word hanging on a cross.


Soon enough, you will spend another day communicating with words. You will write an email or sit in a meeting or talk on a phone. In those communications, use the glory of the living Word who became flesh. Use the flawlessness of the Lord’s written Word. The Word was with God in the beginning, and he will be with you now.

Dear Lord, make my words flawless, just like silver purified in a crucible and gold refined seven times. Make my life full of grace and truth, just like that of the Word who became flesh and made his dwelling among people. Amen.

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*May the many names of Jesus
remind us of who he is and
what he has done for us,
for God the Father has given him . . .*

*“ . . . the name above all names,
that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth
and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that
Jesus Christ is Lord.”*

Philippians 2:9-11



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