

ADVENT DEVOTIONS

*Christ*  
IS THE  
WORLD'S LIGHT



*A gift to you from*

MARTIN LUTHER COLLEGE

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

*May the Holy Spirit bless our meditation  
as we eagerly anticipate the coming of  
Jesus Christ, the World's Light.*

*—Rev. Michael Otterstatter*

Book concept & text selections: Michael Otterstatter  
Devotions: MLC faculty members  
Meditations for the lighting of the candles: Laurie Gauger  
Artwork: Anna Leigh Biedenbender  
Bible Translation: New International Version 2011

# THE ADVENT WREATH

The word *advent* means “coming.” Christians celebrate the season of Advent as a time of preparation and reflection in anticipation of Christ’s coming to earth at Christmas.

The Advent wreath itself, a circle, represents the unending love of God. Evergreens adorning the wreath symbolize the hope of eternal life. The four candles set in the wreath represent the four Sundays until Christmas Day. Some traditions add a fifth candle, the Christ candle.

The lighting of the candles each week in Advent marks the growing anticipation for the birth of Christ, the Light of the World.

1. **The Prophecy Candle:** Also called the Hope Candle, this violet or blue candle symbolizes the Old Testament prophecies of Christ’s coming.
2. **The Bethlehem Candle:** Also called the Peace Candle, this violet or blue candle symbolizes the birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary in the town of Bethlehem.
3. **The Shepherds’ Candle:** Also called the Joy Candle, this rose-colored candle symbolizes the coming of the Savior into the hearts and lives of believers, like the shepherds and like us.
4. **The Angels’ Candle:** Also called the Good News Candle, this violet or blue candle symbolizes the final glorious coming of the Savior with all his angels on the Last Day.
5. **The Christ Candle:** This white candle symbolizes the day of Jesus’ birth, the coming we’ve been waiting for, the advent of Jesus, the Light of the world.



# MEDITATIONS FOR THE LIGHTING OF

## WEEK 1: PROPHECY CANDLE

*Light one candle: the blue Prophecy candle.*



*Prophecy*

We light one Advent candle now.  
**The Prophets' Candle kindles bright.**  
Dispelling darkness, Jesus comes  
and warms us with his holy light.

We enter Advent's silence here;  
**we pause and set this time apart**  
to search the ancient prophecies  
of hope for every human heart.

We think of Eden's promise sure;  
**we think of Abram's starry night;**  
we think of David's greater Son,  
**the Branch, the King of kings, the Light.**

We hear Isaiah's prophecy,  
**the promises of love and peace:**  
This Christ will come to rescue us,  
**forgive, renew, and set us free.**

## WEEK 2: BETHLEHEM CANDLE

*Light two candles: the blue Prophecy and Bethlehem candles.*



*Bethlehem*

We light two Advent candles now.  
**The Beth'lem Candle kindles bright.**  
Dispelling darkness, Jesus comes  
and warms us with his holy light.

We think of little Bethlehem  
**a mere two thousand years ago,**  
the busy streets, the crowded inn,  
and what the people didn't know:

That in a stable God was born  
**and laid upon a bed of hay.**  
The virgin wrapped him, kept him warm:  
**divinity in such a place!**

We ponder in this quiet hour  
**the wondrous miracle to come:**  
how nature kneels and time stands still  
**to see the birth of God's own Son.**

## WEEK 3: SHEPHERDS' CANDLE

*Light three candles: the blue Prophecy and Bethlehem candles and the rose Shepherds' candle.*



*Shepherds*

We light three Advent candles now.  
**The Shepherds' Candle kindles bright.**  
Dispelling darkness, Jesus comes  
and warms us with his holy light.

We see the shepherds on the hill  
**who heard the angels' "Gloria,"**  
who ran to find the holy Child  
and knelt in gratitude and awe.

The shepherds were not slow to trust  
**the angels' unexpected word,**  
nor were those shepherds shy to share  
**the miracle they'd seen and heard.**

Let's wrap ourselves in shepherds' cloaks  
**and search for that most holy Boy.**  
Let's kneel and worship, pray and praise,  
**and share with all the world this joy.**

# THE ADVENT CANDLES *to be read responsively*

## WEEK 4: ANGELS' CANDLE

*Light four candles: the blue Prophecy and Bethlehem candles, the rose Shepherds' candle, and the blue Angels' candle.*



*Angels*

We light four Advent candles now.  
**The Angels' Candle kindles bright.**  
Dispelling darkness, Jesus comes  
**and warms us with his holy light.**

As angels sang the stars awake  
**on that first joyful Christmas night,**  
so one day soon they will announce  
**the second coming of the Christ.**

Once Christmas changed all history;  
**now history waits for change again.**  
We hold our breath and watch the skies,  
**for all the earth is Bethlehem.**

With angels 'round his glorious throne  
**and trumpet peals that split the sky,**  
our King will come to bring us home  
**and wrap us in his shimmering light.**

## CHRISTMAS: CHRIST CANDLE

*Light all five candles, including the white Christ candle.*



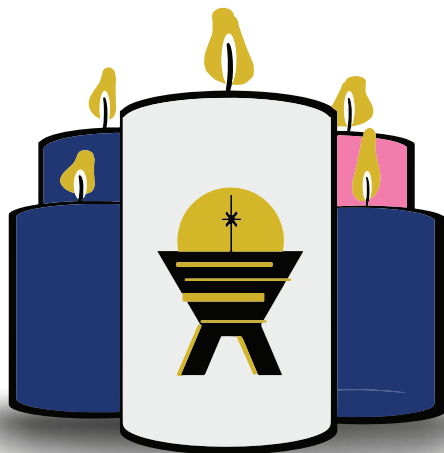
*Christ*

We light five Advent candles now.  
**The Christmas Candle kindles bright.**  
Dispelling darkness, Jesus comes  
**and warms us with his holy light.**

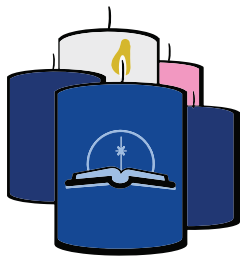
The manger marks the earthly start  
**of heaven's plan to save the lost,**  
for Beth'lem leads to Calvary,  
**and manger soon becomes a cross.**

This Jesus comes to save the world,  
**to mend the places torn apart,**  
to bring true peace, to heal, redeem,  
**to bind up every broken heart.**

And so we make a cradle new  
**inside our hearts to hold God's Son.**  
We pray, "Lord Jesus, be our guest.  
**Fill us with light! Come, Jesus, come!"**



# THE FIRST PROMISE OF THE SAVIOR



## Prophecy

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

Why was Christmas necessary? Adam and Eve had a perfect relationship with God and each other, and had opportunities for meaningful service. What happened? Satan slithered into the garden and got them to fall for the temptation that he’s been using ever since. *“God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.”* In other words, *“God is holding out on you.”*

What perceived lack do you feel in your life right now? I’ll bet it didn’t take you long to think of it. Satan is good, isn’t he?

And even though God said, *“You will surely die,”* and Satan said, *“You will surely **not** die,”* they listened to Satan and they ate. Satan had successfully made Adam and Eve God’s enemies. There was enmity between them and God. The effects of sin were instantaneous. Like the flip of a light switch, the world that God had filled with the light of his perfect touch turned dark.

They heard God walking in the garden, and instead of rejoicing, they hid. They no longer had a perfect relationship with God. Adam blamed his wife: *“The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit and I ate.”* He became the first guy ever to be in the doghouse! They no longer had a perfect relationship with each other. God laid out the results of sin. From now on there would be pain in childbearing, strife in marriage, difficulty in work, and ultimately death. They would not always see the meaningfulness of their work because of the pain. It was the world’s darkest day.

Into the darkness, a light shines: ***“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.”*** God does something so surprising. He speaks the first promise of a Savior. What incredible love! In the Garden of Eden, we said to God, “I don’t want you.” It should have ended right then. There should never have been a Genesis 3:15, but God decided to suffer. That is why there is human history. Genesis 3:15 is the thesis statement for the whole rest of Scripture. A Savior is coming!

Did you notice that the first promise of a Savior wasn’t spoken to Adam and Eve but to Satan? This was a threat against Satan *and* a promise to us. And notice what he is so forcefully promising to do. He’s going to put the wall of enmity back where it belongs, between us and Satan. So, why did there need to be a Christmas? Because God promised there would be, so that he could restore everything we had lost.

**Lord Jesus, you are the world’s light. Ever since the fall in the Garden of Eden, the darkness of sin has covered this world. Shine in my life this Advent season, that those walking in darkness may see your light shining in me. Amen.**

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

# A DESCENDENT OF ABRAHAM

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

According to an MIT study, sales of over-the-counter genetic testing kits (genetic testing not ordered by any medical professional) numbered approximately 14 million by November 2018. The study estimates the number of kits sold by November of 2019 to reach more than 25 million. What is the attraction?



Some people are interested in the health aspect. They wonder if they are at an increased or decreased risk of contracting a disease based on the genetic test results. Others are interested in their heritage. The companies claim to be able to reveal details about lineage. Whether the companies' claims are legitimate or not is not up for debate here. The point is that many people are interested in their genealogy. Why would that be? Simple curiosity? Are these people looking for a sense of belonging? Does a documented heritage convey a sense of identity or security? Perhaps.

We Christians don't need a genetic test to reveal our identity or enhance our sense of security—at least not spiritually. Our text gives the Christian much more security and hope than any genetic test can deliver. Our spiritual lineage goes all the way back to Abraham! Pause and reflect on that a moment. A few select people on this earth may be able to trace their lineage back through a dozen generations. We can trace our spiritual lineage through an unbroken line all the way back to Abraham! How many generations is that? We'll likely never know, but far more than a dozen.

Far more comforting than the unbroken line is the providence of our God, who saw to it that the spiritual line remained unbroken so that you—you, specifically—would hear the gospel and be brought to faith. You needed to hear the gospel, so God arranged history so that you would! He made sure that the gospel message could travel an unbroken path from Abraham to you!

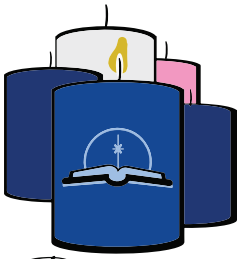
What is the result of a genetic test? A report containing graphs and probabilities, but no definitive statements. In God's promise to Abraham, however, there are no nebulous probabilities. The promise that was passed through the generations is fulfilled. The Savior is here.

We have hope, not in percentages or probabilities, but in the assurance that God's promise is certain. And secure in the assurance that God keeps his promise, we have hope in the promises yet to be fulfilled. We have the hope of heaven!

**O God, our Father, you have given me hope. When I am tempted to question my worth, when I seem invisible, when my purpose is in doubt, remind me of my spiritual lineage. You have given me hope in Jesus and the hope of eternal life. Thanks and praise be to you. Amen.**

*Professor Daniel Fenske serves Martin Luther College as a professor of science.*

# A PROPHET LIKE MOSES



## Prophecy

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

In the Old Testament, God illuminated an increasingly precise portrait of the coming Messiah. Each visible feature kindled the faith that was first lit in Eden. Each detail amplified the people's awareness of God's immeasurable love for them.

In Deuteronomy, Moses gave a series of final sermons. Within this farewell, God blessed him with the opportunity to clarify Jesus' identity. Both Peter and Stephen refer to Christ as the fulfillment of today's text. Like us, the Children of Israel observed Bethlehem's manger from across a broad expanse of time. Our status before God is also identical to theirs: they shared our sin, and they shared our need for a Savior. These verses offer every era the same candle of eternal hope—a universal promise of free salvation.

First, Moses vows that God will provide a prophet "like me." Moses prefigured the Prince of Peace in beautiful ways. Both had exceptional roles in history. The Lord empowered Moses for a unique mission to liberate Israel from slavery to Pharaoh. Christ's ministry too had a singular purpose: to rescue God's children from captivity to sin. This comparison underlines both individuals' lighting the way to deliverance and safety. Of course, the scope of Jesus' work exceeded that of Moses by an infinite measure. God used Moses to free prisoners from temporary confinement by a foreign power. He called upon his Son to redeem all people from endless incarceration in hell. Without God's intervention through Moses, Israel could not enter Canaan. Without God's sacrifice of Jesus' blood, humanity remained powerless to reach heaven.

Moses and Jesus were also alike in serving as mediators between man and God. Each brought a critical message from the Creator to his children. Moses shared God's law and clarified the righteousness our Lord requires. Again, Jesus was far superior, as he alone was able to announce his fulfillment of those demands. Moses offered an incomplete foreshadowing of the blessings the all-surpassing Prophet would provide.

Moses also told the Hebrews that Jesus would come "from among you, from your fellow Israelites." The Son of God would humble himself to become a son of man with Jewish lineage. His divine nature enabled him to fulfill the Father's demand for holiness. His human nature allowed him to pay the penalty for our sins with his suffering and execution. The miracle of his identity far exceeded the wonders of punishing plagues or a splitting sea.

The Messianic promises in Deuteronomy have strengthened sinners for untold generations. These glimpses of the Redeemer previewed the Lord's perfect plan for salvation. The exiles were rebellious and idolatrous, and yet God loved them. Despite our equal shortcomings, God has not and will not ever abandon us. By grace through Christ alone, nothing can extinguish our everlasting certainty.

**Through prophecy and the eyes of faith, Old Testament believers saw the coming Savior. The only path to heaven has remained unchanged. Forgiveness is a free gift won through Jesus' death on the cross. As we celebrate Advent, let that hope light our lives with direction and purpose. Amen.**

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

DECEMBER 4

# KING DAVID AWAITS A GREATER KING

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

Have you closed the door on anyone or anything recently? Maybe it was a literal door as a sales rep was trying to pitch you their product. Maybe you closed the door on an old friend who you believed to be causing some toxicity in your relationship. Maybe you closed the door on a chapter in your life you weren't proud of.

What about your God? Have you closed the door on him recently? We know the Lord of hosts, the King of glory, the Messiah is the reason for this Christmas season, but has he entered into your home, your life, your heart as quickly as a sin that so easily ensnares you? There are so many good things involved with the Christmas season—the parties, the gifts, the family time—but have they entered into your heart as king ahead of the King of glory?

Take a step back and look at what the psalmist David reminds you of. Who exactly is this King of glory that steps into our lives? It's the LORD Almighty, the Lord of hosts, who is King of all kings and Lord of all lords.

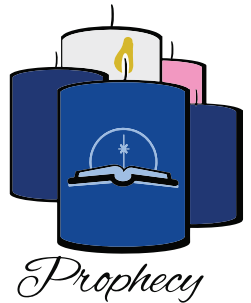
The funny thing is that the King who stepped into history sure doesn't look like the mighty King whom David tells those gates and ancient doors to welcome in. We might expect this type of king to come riding on a noble steed, clothed in kingly clothes, victorious in battle. Yet we see a helpless baby lying in a feeding trough. We see a poor man from Nazareth. We see a quick and somewhat superficial royal welcome while he enters the gates of Jerusalem on a donkey. We see him crowned with thorns and pierced with nails. We see him lying in a tomb. Some king. Why would I want him to come?

Short answer? It's through faith. It's through the faith God has given you that you see his glory even when it seems there's no glory there. This isn't a king who's going to fix all your earthly problems. It's the Messiah King who stepped into this world to do one thing—to be the King who buys you back from the slavery of your worst enemies, sin and death. Jesus comes in glory with the gospel message, and through faith we rejoice when he comes into our hearts with that message of Christ crucified and risen. Through faith we welcome him into our lives where he takes his rightful spot as our number-one priority.

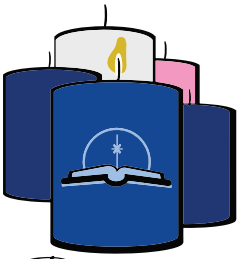
And now? Don't close the door on him. Get ready for that day when he comes again in his full and majestic glory. Get ready to enter his gates, where you will dwell in glory with him forever.

**O King of glory, enter into our lives with your saving grace. Give us a spirit that joyfully yet humbly receives you as King. Keep us true to your Word until you come again in full majesty and glory. Amen.**

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



# JEREMIAH'S PROPHECY



## Prophecy

*“The days are coming”—this is the LORD’s declaration—“when I will raise up a Righteous Branch of David. He will reign wisely as king and administer justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. This is what He will be named: Yahweh [the LORD] Our Righteousness.” (Jeremiah 23:5-6 Holman Standard Christian Bible)*

Jeremiah’s original audience and we have much in common.

Israel’s Northern Kingdom ceased to exist as a nation in

722 B.C., swallowed by Assyria, never to be seen or heard from

again. Judah’s Southern Kingdom was bound for Babylon, where for seven decades they would dwell some 800 miles from the Jerusalem Temple, the representation of the Lord God in their midst. Like their northern brothers, the people of Judah rejected Yahweh, his Word, and his calls to repentance. Because of Judah’s idolatrous affinities, the Lord banished them to Babylon. What about our own idolatry and the pet sins to which we cling? What about our cavalier views of the Lord’s Word and our willingness to skimp on studying Scripture while making time for all manner of Christmas “preparations”? We’re not facing deportation, but as we trifle with grace, we jeopardize the right relationship with our heavenly Father that Jesus has given us.

The kings of Israel and Judah were to be spiritual leaders for God’s people. “Since Judah’s kings had utterly failed to carry out their divine assignment, the Lord would get rid of them and replace them with shepherds after his own heart, faithful shepherds who would do the job that the Lord had called them to do” (Gosdeck, David M. *The People’s Bible: Jeremiah, Lamentations*, p. 143). Such a faithful Shepherd is Jesus. Pulling us from the mire of doubt and the muck of self-indulgence, Jesus calls us to repentance, guides us with his Word of Life, and assures us of limitless forgiveness and his never-ending love. Daily he assures us that we will be saved, that we will dwell securely as we place our trust in him.

In contrast to the 40 kings of Israel and Judah, Jesus, the Righteous Branch, didn’t come to hold on to a crown but to win the crown of life for us. Because the Righteous Branch lived perfectly in our place—never sinning even once—and because his sacrificial death wipes clean our debt to God the Father, we sleep peacefully tonight, free from guilt and the fear of death, awaking tomorrow and the next day assured that his righteousness is ours by grace, through faith, as Scripture declares.

God’s ridiculous grace and incredible patience triumph. Yahweh could have tossed aside those who spurned his love. Instead he foretold the advent of the Righteous Branch. He had them in mind, just as he had you in mind. Christians have heralded Christ’s coming with this hymn for centuries: “Behold, a Branch is growing of loveliest form and grace . . . it springs from Jesse’s race.” Thank God that all his promises are “Yes” in Jesus, because of Jesus.

**O Savior, Child of Mary, who felt our human woes,  
O Savior, King of Glory, who conquered all our foes,  
Bring us at last, we pray,  
To the bright courts of heaven  
And to the endless day. Amen. (CW 47:5)**

*Professor Alan Uher serves Martin Luther College as a professor of education.*

# ZECHARIAH'S PROPHECY

*Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9)*

What causes you to rejoice? Is it when your sports team wins a close game, or wins big? Is it when your political candidate wins an important election? When the Lord blesses you with the birth of a healthy baby?

All of these are realistically potential prospects for rejoicing. Even if your team is the worst in the NFL, on any given day they can put together a victory. Though your political party may experience a resounding defeat in one election, when the victorious political party overreaches with their agenda, public opinion easily reverses, and yours may win a victory in the next election.

But what if you had been an Israelite in the days of Zechariah's prophecy? Would rejoicing and triumph have been prospects you would have realistically expected?

Israel had been defeated by mighty Babylon, and during Zechariah's ministry, a remnant had been allowed to return to their homeland. But Israel had no army; economically they were impoverished. What could possibly happen to give them cause for rejoicing? What triumph might they realistically achieve or experience?

Would we have been excited with Zechariah's prophecy, were we an Israelite at the time? We are too easily drawn to celebrities and limousines, to politicians who sway crowds at large rallies. Would we thrill at the prospect of a prophesied figure who did not care about earthly power, influence, or fame? Who was focused on, of all things, humility?

While we properly rejoice at earthly blessings and thrill to the triumph of a sports victory, we know all too well that such things are uncertain and often transitory. A lopsided victory one week can be followed by a humbling shutout the next. The joy of pregnancy may end with the sorrow of miscarriage.

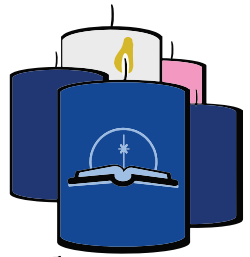
When we realize the things of this world that cause joy and triumph are uncertain and unreliable, we receive Zechariah's words with hearts of hope and joy. And Zechariah's prophecy speaks of the only thing that can win the biggest triumph of all, that can create a heart that will overflow with rejoicing: a king who will come in humility.

A king who will begin his reign as a little baby and, though tempted in all points even as we are, will not once succumb to sin. A king who does not object to riding into the capital city on a colt, who knows that he is being watched, plotted against, and will soon be arrested. A king who does not flinch at merciless flogging, shaming, and crucifixion by callous Roman soldiers. A king who is willing to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, and proves himself victorious by rising triumphantly on the third day.

Rejoice greatly! Your king comes to you, humble, righteous, and victorious!

**Dear Savior, at this Christmastime, our hearts will be glad with many earthly blessings, but grant us the grace to rejoice most of all in the unlikely gift Zechariah prophesied, a humble Savior who gives us the gift of eternal rejoicing and endless triumph. Amen.**

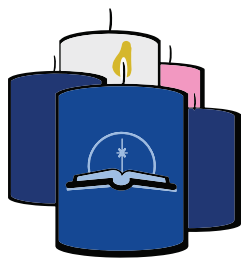
*Professor David Bauer serves Martin Luther College as a professor of music.*



*Prophecy*

DECEMBER 7

# A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES



*Prophecy*

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

What does your DNA say about you? Apparently, that’s a popular question people have about themselves nowadays. Tens of millions of people have submitted a small saliva sample to online companies that provide detailed, personalized reports of their genetic lineage. It turns out that most people’s ethnic backgrounds are more diverse than they imagined.

These DNA tests also identify genetic traits that our ancestors have passed along to us, like freckles, toe length ratio, and even earwax type. More important, our DNA predicts genetic predispositions to diseases like cancer and dementia.

But there is a more important defect from our ancestors that these tests do not see—sin. Everyone has it, and it’s always terminal. God’s Word says, “Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12).

Sin is the underlying cause of every broken relationship, every disease, and finally, every death. It infects our body and our soul. It manifests itself in jealousy, anger, lies, gossip, murder, adultery, and every other evil. Most important, it separates us from our holy God forever and earns us a place in hell.

That’s why Jesus’ name *Light for the Gentiles* and God’s words in Isaiah 49:6 are so special and important. God sent Jesus to fix this defect of sin and restore *all* people to God—both Jews and non-Jews. “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).

Jesus is everyone’s Savior. He supersedes race, ethnicity, and gender. It doesn’t matter if your DNA says you are Scottish, Sardinian, Native American, Southeast Asian, East African, Arabian, Jewish, or German. Jesus is *your* Light. He has redeemed you.

There’s a beautiful picture of heaven that the apostle John sees in the book of Revelation. It shows the fulfillment of Jesus’ work as the restorer of Israel and the Light for the Gentiles.

John writes, “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9-10).

What does your DNA say about you? In Jesus, it doesn’t matter.

**Dear Light for the Gentiles, we praise and thank you for taking on our DNA to be our Savior from sin and all of its consequences. No matter who we are or what we’ve done, you are the only healer for our bodies and our souls. Fill us with the joy of your salvation this Christmas, and help us to be your lights to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. Amen.**

*Dr. John Meyer serves Martin Luther College as director of graduate studies and continuing education.*

DECEMBER 8

# THE SAVIOR COMES FROM BETHLEHEM

*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” (Micah 5:2)*

What can you do with the little old nubber? That smallest candle left from last year’s Advent wreath? Don’t throw it out. Choose it for this year’s Bethlehem candle.

God chose the small and insignificant town of Bethlehem to be the birthplace of Jesus, the ruler of Israel and the world. As in Nazareth, the backwoods town where Jesus grew up, Jesus’ birth came in an unlikely place. This has been God’s way of engineering history from ancient times.

For his Son and our Savior, God chose an unwelcoming place, where no one would make room for a woman about to deliver a baby. Even small towns can be crowded—with personal needs, provincial interests, and little hearts.

God chose a place that the wise men couldn’t figure out. Herod’s priests and teachers did; they knew the Old Testament well and steered the Magi with Micah’s prophecy. Yes, it is certainly better to know the Scriptures than to trek by only starlight, but Herod’s plans show that bare biblical literacy can end up fanning the flames.

God chose a place where babies would be slaughtered. Although the hymn describes Bethlehem as lying still in “deep and dreamless sleep” (CW 65:1), this was no idyllic town for the hero’s entrance. It would be a place where the blood of infants would flow, as Herod killed all the boys 0-2 years old, to wipe out any rival to his rule. Imagine, for a long time afterwards, people would notice something odd about Bethlehem. There would be no boys Jesus’ age running around. Later there would be young women in that gap in Bethlehem who wondered why there was no man of their dreams their own age.

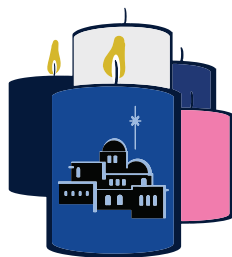
But there is One. Out from this small, cold, and bloody place, God brought his Son, the Savior. From out of that unlikely place comes the One who will rule. He will not rule with power and privilege from on high; he will rule by giving up all he has. He will not take territory; he will transform hearts. He will not win games; he will lose so he can win the ultimate battle.

God loves the little and the unlikely. That is where Jesus comes from, and that is where he is going—to the small, cold places, wherever you are.

What kind of light can come from a little old nubber? “Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight” (CW 65:1).

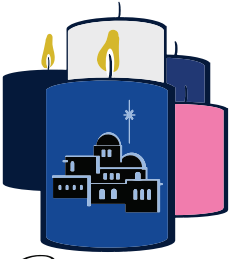
**May your light, Jesus, shine this Advent in our small and cold places. Amen.**

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



*Bethlehem*

# JESUS' ANCESTRY IN BETHLEHEM



*Bethlehem*

*But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."*  
(Ruth 1:16)

Isn't it difficult to get people together over the Christmas season? We want to celebrate together, but more and more we live so far apart. And in his mercy the Lord has taken some of our loved ones to his side, where they enjoy the Christmas season in paradise.

The problem is, we can't get our people to live where we want them to. But God can. God can and does get his people to live in the places he wants. The Spirit inspired the apostle Paul to proclaim, "In him we live and move and have our being."

It's that part about moving that has our attention this week. The Bethlehem candle draws our attention to a small city we might otherwise not know or care much about. But Bethlehem is the birthplace of the Savior. Bethlehem is the birthplace of *our* Savior. Not by accident but by divine design. "But you, Bethlehem, Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

Today's verse from Ruth reminds us of God's careful planning to keep this promise. He would bring to the City of David the people he wanted for the line of the Savior—no matter where they were, physically or spiritually. Ruth was physically from Moab, a Gentile neighbor to the south and east of Judah. As a Moabite, Ruth was raised to worship a false god, so she was spiritually separated from God.

Through a famine during the time of the Judges, the Lord brought believing Israelites down to Moab for food. Two of those Israelites married Moabites, one of whom was Ruth. Through her marriage and her mother-in-law, Naomi, Ruth learned about Israel's God. She learned that God had promised to deliver all sinners, even idolaters like she had been, through the Messiah. By the Spirit's power, Ruth believed. And when the time came for Naomi to return to Israel, to Bethlehem, Ruth said, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."

Little did Ruth know how God would use the confession she made. From the union of Ruth and the believer Boaz, God brought forth Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David. God made Ruth a link in the line of the Savior. Their home in Bethlehem would bring the family of Jesus back to Bethlehem when the time "had fully come."

When we pause to see the hand of God in all of this, we can't help but marvel at God's grace. He used, and still uses, his power to save us. Through Word and sacrament, he works in us the faith of Ruth to follow the God of our salvation.

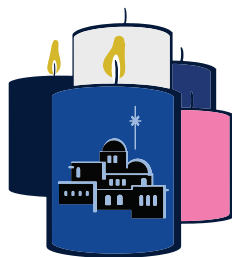
**Direct, control, suggest this day all I design or do or say  
That all my pow'rs with all their might in your sole glory may unite. Amen.**  
(CW 582:4)

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

# JESUS' LINEAGE IN BETHLEHEM

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

I do not like to see trees cut down. I sometimes understand the reasons why—disease, death, a need for building products or fuel—but I still do not like to see it. I especially hate to see the big ones go down, majestic, monumental, and magnificent from decades of growth. It hurts to see something so powerful reduced to kindling, wood chips, and sawdust.



*Bethlehem*

The Kingdom of Judah had its roots in David's reign. This once proud and powerful nation was now on the wrong end of the ax when it came to God's judgment on its future. God tells us through his prophet Isaiah of a Judah reduced to nothing more than a stump of its former greatness. Why? As always, God's wrath is a result of sin.

We are no different. Pride in our own accomplishments or status results in our reduction to nothing but dead stumps in God's eyes. Nothing can give us life. In this season of Advent, if we believe that Jesus' coming has anything to do with our own efforts or worthiness, then we must realize the ax is at the root of this prideful tree as well. Putting hope in our earthly efforts brings only earthly disappointment and spiritual death.

Yet God promised redemption then, and he promises it now. While the stumps of other fallen kingdoms remain lifeless, the stump of Jesse, David's father, would bring help and hope to those who put their faith in the Branch that would grow from it. This Branch, a reference to the Messiah even in the most ancient of Jewish writings, would come from Jesse and David's hometown of Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). While the kings of other nations eventually ended in failure, our King Jesus would succeed in a way none of them could. His success would be rooted in his perfect act of saving love for us. It would bear fruit for all who believe in him and his promises of eternal forgiveness, life, and salvation.

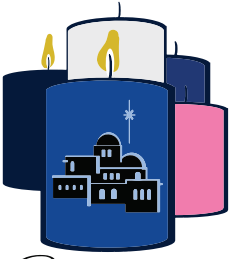
We appreciate and anticipate this redemption as well. As we anticipate the coming of the Christ Child at Advent, we also look to the skies for his coming again on the clouds of glory as our victorious King! His full and free forgiveness is ours through faith in the miraculous work done in perfect love on our behalf.

**Behold, a Branch is growing of loveliest form and grace,  
As prophets sang, foreknowing; it springs from Jesse's race.**

**O Savior, Child of Mary, who felt our human woes,  
O Savior, King of glory, who conquered all our foes,  
Bring us at last, we pray,  
To the bright courts of heaven  
And to the endless day. Amen. (CW 47:1,5)**

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

# A KING ANOINTED IN BETHLEHEM



*Bethlehem*

*The Lord said to Samuel . . . “Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king.” (1 Samuel 16:1b)*

Beginning with Moses, God had instructed his people to make a special oil for anointing those who served as prophet, priest, or king. The recipe for this precise blend of oil and spices was protected by the death penalty! But the anointing oil conveyed by sight and smell that someone had been selected to serve God’s people. It also became the word connected to the Promised Savior: the Messiah, the anointed one.

At the Lord’s command, the prophet Samuel filled an animal horn (used as a container) with that special oil and headed to the home of Jesse of Bethlehem. There he was to pour the oil on the head of one of Jesse’s sons, marking him as the new king over Israel. Although the anointing of a king was an important event, this particular anointing would serve to explain and expand an ancient prophecy about the Messiah.

Generations earlier, the patriarch Jacob had declared regarding his son Judah, *“The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his”* (Genesis 49:10). With the anointing of one of Jesse’s sons as king over Israel, this prophecy took a leap forward. Part of what Jacob had predicted was coming true. David, from the tribe of Judah, had been chosen as king over Israel.

But David’s anointing also served to clarify Jacob’s prophecy about a future king from the clan of Judah. The one to whom the scepter and ruler’s staff truly belonged had not yet come. A few generations after David, the Prophet Isaiah predicted, *“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit”* (Isaiah 11:1). As the one chosen from Jesse’s family, David served as link to a greater king. Jesus was that greater King chosen to rule over God’s people. David’s dynasty would end. Jesus’ rule would never end. David’s kingdom would have limits. Jesus’ kingdom would not. The “obedience of the nations” would belong to Jesus.

The fact that Jesus was a descendent of Jesse from Bethlehem may seem insignificant. But it reminds us that Jesus is the one chosen by God to rule in our hearts and lives forever. The fulfillment of the ancient prophecies about Jesus’ family tree also assures us that he is the flesh-and-blood Savior we needed to live and die in our place. And finally, the fact that Jesus is the Chosen One from Jesse’s family assures us that he rules over all nations as God had promised. Today we rejoice that “great David’s greater Son” (CW 93:1) has come to save us and to serve as our King forever.

**Dear Jesus, you are the one chosen from Jesse’s family to be King over God’s people. You share our humanity and know all our needs. In your love and mercy be our King today and always. Amen.**

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

# THE KING IS BORN IN BETHLEHEM

*So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. (Luke 2:4)*

“Silent Night” was playing in the background.

Mom was yelling at Dad. Dad was yelling at Mom. The kids were yelling at each other. And “Silent Night” was playing in the background.

The siren was blaring. The lights were flashing. The ambulance arrived at the emergency entrance. A stunned family looked on. And “Silent Night” was playing in the background.

The tears were flowing. The hurt was deep. The elderly man gently laid a flower on his wife’s grave. And “Silent Night” was playing in the background.

“See,” skeptics say, “all that Christmas stuff, all that peace-on-earth, goodwill-toward-men business, doesn’t do any good. It doesn’t make any difference.”

But the skeptics are wrong, aren’t they? It’s just *because* there are family quarrels and trips to the emergency room and cemeteries filled with graves that we do need a Christmas. We need the Savior who was born at Bethlehem. We need the forgiveness, comfort, and hope that he brings.

When Caesar August issued his decree to take a census of the Roman world, he set in motion a string of events that God used to fulfill his centuries-old prophecy that the King of the Jews would be born in Bethlehem.

The census required that people return to their hometown to register. Since Joseph belonged to the house and line of David, he and his wife, Mary, traveled to Bethlehem. And so it was that Jesus, the King of the Jews, was born in Bethlehem, just as God had prophesied centuries earlier.

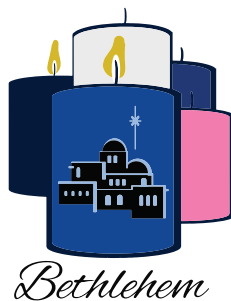
That baby born in Bethlehem fulfilled Old Testament prophecy and went on to live a perfect life, die an innocent death, rise from the grave, and ascend into heaven. He did that in our place to win his heavenly Father’s favor for us and to secure for us a place in heaven.

That baby born in Bethlehem still reigns in heaven as our King, a powerful, wise, and gracious King. He guides the affairs of the world today just as he did in Joseph’s day, accomplishing his saving purpose, making all things serve for his glory and our eternal good, and waiting until the time is right to take us to join him around his heavenly throne.

Family quarrels, trips to the emergency room, and graves in a cemetery remind us that we do need a Christmas. We need that Savior King who was born in Bethlehem. And by God’s grace we have him.

**Lord Jesus, as we look forward to celebrating Christmas, as we hear those familiar words of “Silent Night” playing in the background, help us by your Spirit through your Word to remember the difference that your birth makes, both for this life and for the life to come. Amen.**

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



*Bethlehem*

# DAVID'S HEIR BRINGS PEACE



*Bethlehem*

*"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David . . . to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." (Luke 1:68-69,79)*

Imagine you're Zechariah the priest. You have seen an angel who told you that your barren wife, Elizabeth, is going to have a child by you, even though both of you are far too old to have kids. Also, because you doubted the message, God has rendered you speechless throughout Elizabeth's pregnancy.

But now your son has been born, the one the angel Gabriel told you to name John. And as you prepare to name him at his circumcision, suddenly you're able to talk again. Besides reaffirming that "his name is John," what else will you say? Will you complain about how hard it was to function all those days while rendered speechless?

As we might expect, the words just come gushing out of Zechariah's mouth. Yet there is no complaining, only praise! For nine months Zechariah has silently pondered the marvelous message Gabriel announced to him. Not only would he have a miracle baby boy, but that boy would "be great in the sight of the Lord" because he would "make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah and Elizabeth's son would be the forerunner of the promised Messiah!

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah bursts into a song of praise to the coming Christ Child, his Savior, Israel's Savior, the world's Savior. Yes, Zechariah marvels at the role his son, John, gets to play in all of this, but he keeps the spotlight fixed on the coming Christ.

The Lord, the God of Israel, has finally kept his promise to his chosen people. He has raised up a "horn" of salvation (a powerful King) from King David's own family tree, in King David's own hometown of Bethlehem, just as the prophets had promised.

This son of David would be greater than David himself. He would redeem his people and bring them *peace*—true, lasting peace. He would accomplish this not by defeating earthly armies, but by paying for our sins, which had placed us at enmity with our God. Thus, he would remove the curse of death that hung over us.

Read Zechariah's entire prophecy of praise (Luke 1:67-79). Note that Christ our King came to save us "through the forgiveness of [our] sins" in order to "enable us to serve [our God] without fear." *That's* real peace, what we need most of all. That's why, when the Christ Child was born, the angels praised God for "peace on earth." That's why, only hours before he was crucified, Jesus reassured his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you." That's why, after Jesus rose from the dead, his first words to those same frightened disciples were, "Peace be with you."

That's why, this Advent season, you and I happily join Zechariah in grateful praise.

**Dear Father in heaven, we praise you in these dark days of December for keeping your promise and sending us your own Son to save us. You have graciously shined on us who live in the darkness of our sin, under the shadow of our well-deserved death, with the glorious light of the forgiveness of our sins. In Christ alone, continue to guide our feet into the path of peace. Amen.**

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

# THE SHEPHERDS HEAR

*But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:10-12)*

Shepherds in the fields watching flocks only expected trouble. Their role was to stay with the animals, defending and protecting them against any kind of danger. It was among the humblest of jobs in that culture. Long stretches of days, even weeks, passed while animals grazed in open country, the men living, separated from their homes, amongst the livestock day and night. Animals would be the most likely type of predator, but any disturbance could startle their flock or herd—especially at this time, when increased numbers of people (including Joseph and a very pregnant Mary) traveled to the town of David. Before he was the king and namesake of the town, David had also served his father as shepherd, resulting in battles that prepared him to face Goliath. “Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear,” David said in 1 Samuel 17:36.



If something broke the calm and darkness while the rest of the world was asleep, it would certainly rouse the shepherds into action. Instead of the shadows and dark shapes of rocks and sleeping animals, instead of the sounds of animals breathing or shifting in their sleep, an angel appeared and spoke to them. As their hearts started pounding and their senses heightened, expecting the worst, they saw instead an angel in the glory of God.

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’”

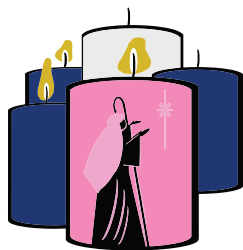
The words and message of the angel address their fears and yet encourage a different kind of action. It isn't a sly, hunkering, fanged foe they meet this night; it is instead a messenger with good news. The message includes a descriptor that it is for all people, not just them. It also describes a unique sign or way to identify this baby. Wrapped in cloths, lying in a manger—it was as unlikely then as it is now for a newborn to be in such a place. The words of good news, the birth of the Messiah, the Lord, were what shepherds and all Jews waited to hear. The promise of salvation that had been passed down for generations was fulfilled. This is the source of great joy for all people. The town of David waited for this son of David to enter the world, to redeem the people, to conquer sin and death.

The shepherds were in darkness, alone on silent hills. This good news transformed their desolation into the stunning light and presence of the glory of God. Believers, like those shepherds, have been transformed. No longer do we live in darkness and despair, separated from God by sin. Now we live in the light and glory of God's family. The Messiah's birth, life, and death change lives. That is good news, and it is ours to cherish and share with all people.

**Dear Jesus, we thank you for being the Messiah, taking us from a life of sin and darkness to a life of spiritual peace and joy on earth, and finally a life of glory with God in heaven. Amen.**

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

# THE SHEPHERDS TELL



## Shepherds

*So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. . . . The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. (Luke 2:16-18,20)*

The second chapter of Luke paints what at first glance appears to be two stark contrasts. Opening with the familiar words, “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree,” the chapter begins with one of the most powerful figures in history, a mighty emperor, and then leads to a humble baby born in the lowliest of circumstances. Similarly, the news of Jesus’ birth is heralded by angel hosts, heavenly beings and God’s messengers, but they are not bringing the most important birth announcement of all history to kings or rulers, the wealthy or the powerful, but to a group of common shepherds.

Though the disparities are strong, they quickly resolve into similarities. How is a baby, born in a stable, like an emperor? This child is the Christ, the Anointed One promised to God’s people, whose kingdom will far eclipse that of the Roman Empire in both time and place. Augustus commanded the Roman legions and oversaw an immense territory, ushering in the Pax Romana, a 200-year period of peace in the empire. Jesus would go on to conquer sin, death, and the devil, ruling in the hearts of believers and bringing peace to sinners through his work of reconciliation.

What could be more different than a choir of angels, God’s very own messengers, and a collection of lowly shepherds? As these simple laborers recovered from the shock of the heavenly presence that had so terrified them, the angels’ good news sank in. The shepherds in turn hurried off to Bethlehem, bringing praise and worship to their newborn King. Following their visit to the stable, the shepherds spread the joy of Jesus’ birth, as they became messengers of the fulfillment of God’s promise.

Like the shepherds, we have a message of the highest importance and greatest joy. Each year we celebrate our Savior’s arrival, and every day we rejoice in the salvation he has won for us. This message is too momentous, too powerful, too important to keep to ourselves. Again, like the shepherds, we want to go out, glorifying and praising God for sending his Son on that first Christmas.

Does the Christmas season seem too busy to devote time to sharing the message of Christ? Do you feel like you are not the right person to convey this vital news? Then, like shepherds, run to the manger to see God’s Promised One delivered to earth, the very same Jesus who delivered us from sin, and then see if you cannot help but spread the Word, glorifying and praising God.

**Dear heavenly Father, as we hear the message of your Son’s birth this Christmas, make us like the shepherds, eager to go and see, and joyful to spread the Word about this Child. Amen.**

*Professor Benjamin Clemons serves Martin Luther College as dean of educational studies.*

# JESUS' BIRTH BRINGS JOY

*And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. (Luke 1:46-49)*

Fewer than 10 shopping days to go! Do you have all your gifts? Are the presents wrapped? How about the baking? Are the lights and decorations up? How is the Christmas fund? Is the house "Christmas clean"? Now that's enough to stress you out, isn't it?

We often let Christmas do that to us—stress us out. We say we're not going to, but nothing ever seems to change. Nor will it, until and unless Jesus really does become the reason for the season.

Jesus' mother, Mary, can help us as we listen to her beautiful Advent hymn, the *Magnificat*, and take her words to heart.

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant." Though Mary had a great deal going on in her life—an angel had just visited her, the Holy Spirit had "overshadowed" her, she was pregnant with the Son of God, and she had set out on a 100-mile journey on foot—she did not allow it to rob her of the joy she felt as she anticipated the birth of her Savior God.

So was Mary some kind of a saint? Some think so. But listen to Mary's words: "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior." A saint doesn't need the Savior; only a sinner does. That's what Mary was—a sinner in need of a Savior. God's law had convicted Mary of her sin and convinced her of her guilt. So God's announcement of the birth of the Savior from that sin filled Mary's heart with joy.

Do you want an Advent full of joy instead of stress? Mary's hymn holds the key. Focus on God your Savior. When Jesus returns on the Last Day, it's not going to matter how many different kinds of cookies you baked. No one will remember what you got them, and if they do, it won't matter. Nor is there a special place in heaven for those who put up the most lights. Advent and Christmas are about Jesus, our only Savior from sin.

This is why we call Mary blessed. "From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name." Not because *she* is holy. Nor because *she* did great things for us. But because God did great things for her, and for us through her. Through Mary, God gave us the Savior Jesus. When our soul is focused on him, joy will follow.

**Dear Holy Spirit, fill my heart with joy this Advent season as I look forward to celebrating the birth of my Savior, Jesus. Amen.**

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



# JESUS' BIRTH BRINGS PEACE



*Shepherds*

*Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid.  
The LORD, the LORD himself, is my strength and my song;  
he has become my salvation. (Isaiah 12:2)*

Just a week until Christmas Eve! Just a week until all the candles are lit and the full light of the Advent season shines brightly in the midst of darkness! Oh, yes, the darkness. Wait . . . why even mention such a thing? Just the sound of it puts a damper on the excitement. Didn't we just say that Christmas is almost here?

Clearly, we are all eager for the sights and sounds of joy that come with the celebration of Christ's birth. But it is the very nature of light that it drives out darkness. Advent is a season of penitence that exposes the darkness of sin. Isaiah prophesied often about spiritual darkness. In his time, about 700 years before Jesus was born, life in Israel might have been described as a spiritual black hole. And the worst part was that many, many people seemed careless about sin's corrupting influence. Isaiah described the people as deceitful and rebellious, arrogant and superstitious, proud and unfaithful. He prophesied: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter" (5:20). People had turned life upside down.

Sound familiar? Greed is good, and the definition of love is distorted. Life is a quest for excitement; people are bored with God. Passions inflame about petty things, but apathy defines spiritual matters. That's our world. Too often that's my own life—narcissistic, proud, neglectful, lazy.

This much is certain: We all will get exactly what we need for Christmas. Piercing through the darkness are beams of great hope and joy. In the midst of a divine tongue-lashing, God supplies comfort through Isaiah's promises. "The virgin will give birth to a son . . . Immanuel . . . the Prince of Peace." Isaiah clears away the anxiety of sin's curse. "God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD is my strength and song."

The word that Isaiah used for *salvation* is the root word for the name *Jesus*. The angel said to Joseph prior to the birth of Christ: "[Mary] 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).

It's all about the gift of salvation! Sins forgiven. "He has done glorious things!" Isaiah exclaimed. Trust and rejoice!

**How blest the land, the city blest, where Christ the ruler is confessed!  
O peaceful hearts and happy homes to whom this King in triumph comes:  
The cloudless sun of joy is he who comes to set his people free.  
To God the Spirit raise your happy shouts of praise. Amen. (CW 3:3)**

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

# THE GIFT OF SALVATION

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Was it by accident? Was it on purpose? Do you ever remember discovering *beforehand* what your Christmas gift from your parents would be? Perhaps you were the totally curious and little bit devious sort who purposely went looking (snooping) for that gift way before it was actually handed to you. Maybe it was totally by accident that you just happened to come across your parents' stash of gifts before they were even able to wrap them, and you just knew which gift was coming your way for Christmas. Then remember too, if you were that snooping type who discovered the gift, that you actually tried to act extra surprised when you finally opened that gift so you wouldn't disclose your true peeping nature.



Now consider what God is telling us about his gift for us. He wants us to know absolutely everything there is to know about it. Snoop around, peek all you want at any time. God's gift to you has many amazing and wonderful qualities and characteristics. Open it now, open it tomorrow, and open it later! Open it every day! At every moment of every day, it is always the perfect gift!

First of all, it is the perfect gift because of the message it contains. "You have been saved." This is the message that you have been saved from sin, death, and the devil. You have been saved to spend eternity not in hell, but in heaven. The tense of this verb is so refreshing to our ears, as it assures us that this is an accomplished fact already. You *have been*—it is a done deal—saved.

Even better, this gift of our salvation is given freely to us as an action of God's grace. There is no Santa's list to see if we have been naughty or nice regarding God's gift. Simply put, God loves us with an unconditional love called grace. This grace is so amazing, he gave it to us, not because of anything we had done or ever could do. We are assured that he gave us this gift even while we were still sinners, totally undeserving of it. That's why it is called grace. It is not by works!

This gift becomes ours personally through faith. God's grace even works in me the power to believe this message of salvation as the Holy Spirit works through the means of grace, which are the Word and sacraments.

No surprises with God's gift. No snooping or peeking necessary. God's gift to you is salvation through Jesus Christ as our Savior from sin and death. The gift is freely given to you by God's grace through faith. Your salvation is already accomplished by Jesus' substitutionary life and death. Enjoy the gift!

**Dear God, what a wonderful and precious gift you have already given to me. By grace, through faith, you have assured me of my salvation, which is already a "done deal" because of Jesus Christ, my Savior. Amen.**

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

# AN ANGEL APPEARS TO MARY



*In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." (Luke 1:26-28)*

How are you at wrapping Christmas presents? Many people take no pleasure in it at all and would rather pay others to do it for them. I actually enjoy it—trimming the paper to the right size, taking great pains to line up the patterns and designs of the paper, and adding the matching ribbon and bow at the end.

God wrapped a Christmas present for us. He planned it since the world began. Now, as the big day draws near, he wants to get us ready to receive this present he has wanted to give us since before we were born.

But look at how God wrapped your Christmas present. He sent it to Mary, a girl of no note or position, who was engaged—or espoused, according to Jewish custom—to a man by the name of Joseph. Though they were both of the house of David, they did not live in the city of their ancestors, but in the town of Nazareth in Galilee, a backwater town in the mountains southwest of the Sea of Galilee. You would think that with all God's preparations for Christmas, he would have wrapped his present a bit more fancily. He could have sent the angel Gabriel to holy Jerusalem or to mighty Rome, to ancient Damascus or to learned Athens. But no, that is not the way he wanted it.

So Gabriel came to the lowly maid in the forgotten town of Nazareth. First, he calmed Mary's fears and assured her she had found favor with God. He had shown his grace, his undeserved favor, by choosing her to be the mother of the world's Savior. As she herself said in the *Magnificat*: "From now on all generations will call me blessed." Gabriel announced, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." That's not what we would have expected. But how perfect! How wonderful the lowly wrapping!

We marvel at the wrapping because he came to a nowhere place to a lowly virgin. And he comes to us in our nowhere places too! He comes to our unworthy selves that merited nothing and gives us, like Mary, the greatest favor ever bestowed on anyone in all of history. Just as the angel assured Mary that God was with her, God assures us that he is with us as well. He delights to embrace the lowly and the lonely, those desperately in need of his mercy and redemption.

The package is wrapped, and the contents are breathtaking! A Savior to the world! The perfect sacrifice for sinners. The King for all people. In the days leading up to Christmas, we wait to unwrap God's gift and see the present given by the one who says to us: "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

**Heavenly Father, because of the gift of your Son that you gave to me on Christmas, I now stand before you purified from all sin. Thank you for always being with me and finding favor in me only because of Jesus' perfect life and atoning sacrifice in my place. Keep me always in your Word, that I may treasure this gift all the days of my life. Amen.**

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

# AN ANGEL CALMS JOSEPH'S FEARS

*But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 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 1:20-21)*



What are some things you have considered in these past days? Maybe you've considered where to plan your next vacation. Maybe you're considering what last-minute gifts to buy for your loved ones. Those are the kinds of things you consider. But something that seems to go beyond just consideration is the situation that Joseph was in. He was pledged to be married to Mary, "but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant." So Joseph was considering what to do next. Can you imagine what sort of emotions were flowing through Joseph? There must have been a huge range of anger, disappointment, and confusion, but also care and consideration for Mary. And fear. So there Joseph is, with this whirlpool churning inside him, as he considers what he should do. What should he do?

Have you ever asked yourself that same question? What should I do? When you truly find yourself in that kind of situation, it's usually accompanied by the same whirlpool of emotions—confusion, disappointment, and fear. "What should I do when my car unexpectedly breaks down? What should I do to help fix this strained relationship? What should I do when it feels like things are spiraling out of control and I don't know what to grab onto?"

God gave Joseph something to calm his fears as he considered this huge, unexpected turn in life. An angel of the Lord came to Joseph. And instead of telling him not to fear the appearance of himself, an angel, he said, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife," speaking to his most immediate fear. He told Joseph about the miracle that was taking place and how he would be a part of it. He would be this child's father.

But then the angel gave him even more—the answer to *all* Joseph's fears. The answer to all the world's fears. The answer to all your fears. "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

No matter what sort of emotions swirl within you when you wonder what to do next, no matter how fearful the future might make you, when you feel yourself spinning, cling to Jesus. Cling to his name. He was born to save his people. That's you! Jesus came to save all those who share in his humanity, who have walked in this world that's been corrupted by sin. And Jesus conquered it through his death and resurrection. Just as the angel calmed Joseph's fears, he calms any fears you have too. Jesus was born. He was born for you. He was born to save.

**Dear Father in heaven, calm any fears that trouble my heart as I go through the trials and struggles of this world. Reassure me of my security and the future that is my possession through faith in Jesus, my Savior. Encourage me to proclaim the name that is above every name, that many more may know that Jesus was born to save. Amen.**

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

# THE ANGELS

## WORSHIP JESUS



*And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, “Let all God’s angels worship him.” (Hebrews 1:6)*

Worship! For Christians this word often brings to mind a sanctuary with songs and sacraments, with pulpit and pews and people. Do you also think of angels in the alcove? Scripture speaks of angels being present in the assembly of believers, eager to examine the Scriptures. Let’s view weekly worship with eyes of faith. Although the ushers have no way of counting angels for the attendance records, never doubt they join us in worship of the Christ.

Worship! Paul also reminds us that worship is not confined within a building. Our whole life is worship. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (*Romans 12:1*). Everything we think, we feel, we say, we do is to be an act of worship praising Jesus, the great “I Am.” As children of Adam, born in sinful hostility to Jesus, our nature glories in self-worship. Yet the Spirit unleashes his omnipotence through his inspired Word and creates saving faith. Now we are eager to live in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

The holy angels never fail in their worship of the Christ. Their whole existence is cheerful worship of the Christ, who created them. Christ “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible . . . all things have been created through him and for him. . . . In him all things hold together” (*Colossians 1:15-17*). Indeed, the Lord reminded Job that “the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy” at the creation (*Job 38:7*).

Multitudes of angels sang in glorious worship at the birth of Immanuel. Angels again worshiped the Christ as they served him by sharing the resurrection message with confused and frightened women. Angels worshiped the Christ as they proclaimed the ascension promise of Christ’s glorious return. And when the Christ returns, multitudes of angels will loudly sing, “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (*Revelation 5:12*)

Someday, you and I will be like the angels. No, a bell won’t ring. We won’t get wings. Angels are spirit beings; we are flesh-and-blood human beings. But in the resurrection, we will be perfect in our worship of the Christ, the great “I Am.” Like the holy angels, everything we are, we do, we say, we think—all will redound to the glory of the Christ. He is the Incarnate One, about whom the angels sing, “Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen” (*Revelation 7:12*).

**Holy Spirit, let our Christmas worship echo the praises of the angels.  
O Lord, awaken songs of praise for angel hosts that guard our days;  
Teach us to serve you and adore as angels do forevermore. Amen.** (CW 196:6)

*Rev. Mark Zarling serves Martin Luther College as president.*

# THE SECOND ADVENT

## OF THE SAVIOR

*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. (Matthew 25:31)*

When I was a young boy, Advent used to mean one thing and one thing only: Christmas decorations and desserts. The tree would be cut, Mannheim Steamroller would be cranked, the lights would go on the roof, and cookies would be baked. Without this young adolescent realizing it, Advent turned into a pre-season for Christmas instead of a focus on what Christ had promised he was still going to do.



Maybe the same rings true for you. It might not be the sweet smells of pine and cookies, or beautiful lights beaming through the darkness. It might be something else causing you to be distracted from the true meaning of Advent. It might be the smallest thing causing you to lose focus on all of God's eternal plan.

So before you celebrate the start of God's plan of salvation, don't forget to look at the final piece of his marvelous plan. Christmas will come, but Advent is here now. Now is a time to remember God still has plans for your eternal salvation. Advent is not just about the Savior's first coming, but about the return of the King again. It is about looking forward to a wonderful and glorious day and realizing that one day we will celebrate with more than just decorations, gifts, and sweets.

Advent is a time to focus on the beauty and majesty of your God, who will come back. He came once to seek and save the lost, sinners like you and me. But our gracious and loving God will come back to give it all to you forever. He will come back for you, demonstrating even more that the worthless are worthy and the sinners are saved, all by his doing. It's hard to imagine that day, but Matthew sheds some light on it. He paints a scene of our Savior's wonderful glory, a King seated on his throne, surrounded by his angels.

This Advent season, remember a Savior who came for you and who will come in a glorious way again. Take time away from the hustle and bustle, the Christmas rush, and the last-minute decorating. Focus on the King. He is victorious. He is triumphant. He is your King.

Celebrations, loved ones at your side, and feasts to feed an army look different each year. As you lay your head on the pillow in this season of Advent, take heart that there's one thing that never changes. You have your unchanging Savior who came for you. He's the absolute and eternal light of salvation—this coming season and the next. He came once and will come again to take you home forever.

**Dear Lord, keep me ever mindful about your coming again. You came once to win eternal life for this sinful world, including me. You have promised that you will come again to take me to be with you, my triumphant King. Amen.**

*Rev. Hans Thomford serves Martin Luther College as an instructor and dormitory supervisor.*

# ANGELS SING TO THE WORLD



*Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” (Luke 2:13-14)*

It was a “celebration heard around the world.” On May 8, 1945, citizens in cities across the globe sang and danced and cheered upon hearing the news that the Nazi armies had surrendered and the catastrophic war in Europe was at an end. In cities like London, Toronto, and New York, hosts of people filled the streets with the noisy, unrestrained

cacophony of victory. In New York City, the *Times* reported that “snowstorms of paper cascaded from skyscrapers, ships let go with their sirens, and garment workers threw brightly colored bales of rayons, silks and woollens into the celebrating streets.” The pain and death, the tears and fears, the horror and evil and hopelessness of war was over, and the time had come for shouts and songs—victory had arrived!

Luke records a remarkably similar scene full of the loud shouting and the song of victory, a remarkably similar military scene full of celebrating soldiers and amazed citizens. The Lord God had announced his victory, and it was very good news of the greatest joy for all the people of this war-torn world of sin. The Lord’s Champion, the world’s Savior, had been born!

The army of angels couldn’t help but shout and sing out the truth about Christ. He was proof, in the flesh, of God’s grace and favor toward sinners. He was the mediator who brought the peace of forgiveness to sinners. He was the very glory of God, showing in his own body God’s faithfulness and power to rescue sinners from the curse of death. He was here; the Savior was here. The little child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger meant the victory of life was here. The pain and death, the tears and fears, the horror and evil and hopelessness of the sinner’s war with the holy God were over, and the time had come for shouts and songs!

The joy of V-E Day faded away over time, as has every celebration of earthly peace. The peace nations celebrate doesn’t last, no matter how loud the shouting or how joyful the songs. But the peace of Christ will never end, and the shouts and songs of angel armies will never quiet. So pick up the tune in your own heart and sing it loudly in your own life—Jesus lives, and you live with Jesus, and that joyful life will never end.

**Put a song in my heart, Lord, and make my life a celebration of your victory. And keep me singing the beautiful song of faith till the day my Savior Jesus returns. Amen.**

*Rev. Jeff Schone serves as vice president for student life.*

# THE GREATEST CHRISTMAS GIFT

*But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!* (Romans 5:15)

G. One letter. Try to remember that one letter: G.

G is worth remembering because the apostle Paul uses two critical words in Romans 5:15 that start with *G*: *gift* and *grace*. He uses those words after stating that “sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). Martin Luther refers to that statement in his section on sin in the Smalcald Articles: “Here we must confess, as Paul says in Romans 5:12, that sin originated from one man, Adam. By his disobedience, all people were made sinners and became subject to death and the devil” (*SA 3, 1:1*). Sin has devastating consequences for us and for all people. Sin deadens, destroys, and damns.



However, that is not the end of the story. “But,” Paul says, “the gift is not like the trespass.” Don’t miss the glorious difference! “For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!” The trespass of one man brought death to all, but God’s grace, his love for undeserving sinners, is infinitely greater. Grace moved God to promise Adam a divine solution. That promise was fulfilled 2,000 years ago when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, lived a perfect life in our place, and died on a cross to pay the wages of our sin. Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, and his resurrection demonstrates that the sin of the world has been taken away.

Paul uses two Greek words for *gift* in Romans 5:15, *chárisma* and *dórea*. Although there may be slight differences in shades of meaning, both words essentially refer to something that is given freely, something that is neither earned nor deserved. In the original Greek, the first word used here by Paul for gift, *chárisma*, is derived from the same root as the word Paul uses for grace: *cháris*. It is a happy happenstance that in English, both *gift* and *grace* begin with the letter G. The coincidence may prompt us to think of *gift* whenever we come across the word *grace* in our Bibles or our devotional reading. As we should!

There will be countless gifts given and received on Christmas Eve and tomorrow, on Christmas Day. Retailers have been competing for our attention—and our hard-earned dollars—since long before Thanksgiving, and we may have grown weary of the misguided and materialistic warping of this wonderful birthday celebration. If so, remember the letter G. Remember that “the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ,” is the greatest Christmas gift.

**Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child, make thee a bed, soft, undefiled  
Within my heart, made clean and new, a quiet chamber kept for you. Amen.**  
(CW 38:13)

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

## JESUS IS GOD'S

*The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let the one who hears say, "Come!" Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.*  
(Revelation 22:17)

Christmastime brings such a mixture of feelings. For many of us, Christmas is a time—perhaps the only time in a year—that the entire family is able to come together. We share hugs. We share laughs. We share meals. We share stories. We share memories . . . and then it seems that everybody has to run. The buildup and preparation is long, yet the time together seems too short.

There was a long buildup and preparation on God's part, too, for the coming of his own dear Son into the world. God had drawn up the plan even before the creation of the world, and he first revealed it in the garden to give hope to our first despairing parents. God himself repeated the plans in person and through his prophets down through the ages. Then, on a quiet Christmas night, the Savior of the world came to be Immanuel, "With us—God!"

The Christmas gospel loudly, joyfully proclaims, *Our God is with us!* Our God has come to help us, to rescue us from the dark night of sin, shattering it with the brightness of his love and grace. What's more, this Immanuel is not just God's Son; he is also our brother who humbled himself to help us in our weakness. The Son of God and the Son of Man destroyed death and the guilt of sin and, by his holy work, opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.

But then, so soon, it was all over. Everything was done, and God's Son and our brother returned to the Father. After all, 33 years on the earth isn't really all that long, and how often we secretly, longingly wish that Jesus still were here—that mixture of feelings that comes with being part of the family of God.

Yet this name from the prophet, "Immanuel," reminds us that he is still with us—always, to the very end of the age. One of our Advent hymns catches the comfort so wonderfully:

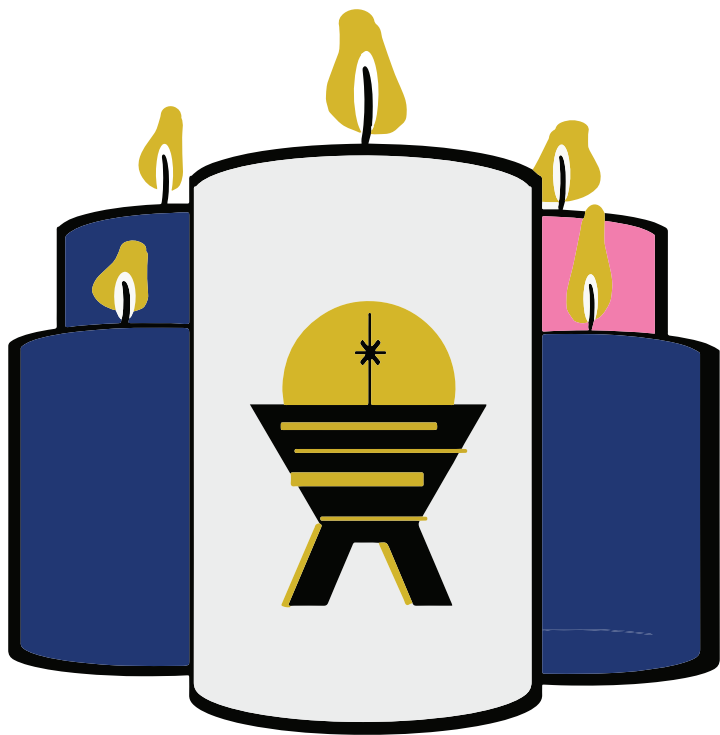
In every age—let praise abound—he comes; we hear his voice resound.  
His glorious gospel does not cease to bring us comfort, joy, and peace.  
He comes in water to the child and cleanses it, from birth defiled.  
He come to us in bread and wine to give himself—and gifts divine. (CW 5)

Yes! This dear baby lying in a manger is the mighty God, and he remains forever Immanuel. God grant you each a most blessed celebration of our Savior's birth.

**Oh, come, oh, come, Immanuel—through Word, through sacraments, remain with us until we are with you forever. Amen.**

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

GIFT TO WORLD



*Christ*





MARTIN LUTHER COLLEGE

**[mlc-wels.edu](http://mlc-wels.edu)**

**507.354.8221**