



# *The Jesse Tree*

**ADVENT DEVOTIONS**

*A gift to you from Martin Luther College*





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**Bible translation:** New International Version 2011





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

May the Holy Spirit renew and refresh us  
as we ponder once again  
the Old Testament stories  
leading to the birth of Jesus Christ,  
descendant of King David and of his father, Jesse.

*"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;  
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit."*

Rev. Michael Otterstatter  
Vice President for Mission Advancement





# The Jesse Tree


**History:** The Jesse Tree has been an Advent tradition since medieval times. The name comes from Isaiah 11:1, which says, *"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit."* That Branch is Jesus, springing from the family tree of Jesse, the father of King David.

The first Jesse Trees were artworks used as teaching aids for Christians who were illiterate. Whether sculptures, tapestries, paintings, or stained glass windows, they served as visual reminders of the salvation story from creation to Christmas. All the people in these Old Testament narratives play an important role in the salvation story, and many of them are actual ancestors of Jesus, part of his family tree.

**Today:** Christians use Jesse Trees today like Advent calendars, reviewing a different story from December 1 to Christmas Day, and putting a symbolic ornament on their own Jesse tree. Here are a few suggestions to start this Advent tradition at your house:

- **Your Jesse Tree:** You can use your own Christmas tree, or you can designate something else as a Jesse tree: an artificial mini-tree, a wire or metal tree, a bare branch brought in from outside, an evergreen garland on your staircase or fireplace mantel, or even a large, homemade paper banner.
- **Jesse Tree Ornaments:** You can access the ornaments designed by Peter Schaeve for this book at [mlc-wels.edu/publications/seasonal-devotions](http://mlc-wels.edu/publications/seasonal-devotions). There you'll find the ornaments in two forms: full-color just like the ones in this booklet and black-line masters to color yourselves. You can print them on printer paper or cardstock. To make them even sturdier, glue two copies of each ornament to cardboard (front and back). Or use clear contact paper to laminate them.



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- **This Devotional Booklet:** Martin Luther College faculty members have written these devotions primarily for a teenage and adult audience. If you have younger children, you may want to supplement this book with the children's stories.
  - **Supplementary Children's Stories:** You can find a children's version of each Bible story at [mlc-wels.edu/publications/seasonal-devotions](http://mlc-wels.edu/publications/seasonal-devotions). These have been carefully crafted for younger children by Martin Luther College education majors. Each includes a clear connection from the Old Testament story to our Savior Jesus.
  - **Family or Classroom Use:** Here are a few suggestions for using the Jesse tree:
    - Each day, at breakfast, dinner, or bedtime, read the designated devotion (either the children's story or adult devotion) and put the ornament on your own Jesse tree. See if the children can remember the connection of the story to Jesus.
    - As the days go by, review the stories by asking the children to find another ornament on the Jesse Tree and briefly tell the family the story associated with it. If they can make the Jesus connection, even better!
    - At Christmas, intersperse your gift opening with Bible story breaks. Have your children (and adults too) choose an ornament and tell the story associated with it. For extra fun, tape a small treat to the back of each laminated ornament. The children can eat the treat after they've told the story.

We hope you find these devotions, Bible stories, and Advent ornaments a meaningful way to prepare for the coming of Jesus, the Branch from Jesse's tree, this Christmas!



DECEMBER 1

# The Root of Jesse

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



Spring 2020 in New Ulm brought a vivid reminder of the terrible effects of sin on all creation. Strangely enough, it wasn't so much the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, we saw devastation as our city aggressively dealt with infection of another kind—the plague of emerald ash borers. Hundreds of beautiful ash trees fell to saws just as the earth had begun to awaken from its winter nap.

Stumps were everywhere, and it took a while before crews came and grubbed them out of the ground. As I took morning walks, I couldn't help but notice that out of those seemingly dead stumps, shoots of new life began to grow.

God called the prophet Isaiah not only to proclaim some of the most beautiful Old Testament promises about the coming Savior, but also to preach God's harsh message of judgment upon a "sinful nation, loaded with guilt" (Isaiah 1:4).

Our text contains messages of both judgment and hope, and it sets an appropriate tone for us as we begin our yearly Advent journey. God's judgment is here: Like their fellow Israelites in the North who had been exiled to Assyria 120 years earlier, the Kingdom of Judah and the ruling house of David, Jesse's son, would also fall because of their persistent rebellion and sin. They would be dragged off to exile in Babylon for 70 years. The last king in David's line would be cut down with a sword, and to every human eye, it would seem as if the royal family tree had come crashing down. As for us, Isaiah still warns us not to trifle with God's grace by treating sin lightly. For hell is a worse exile than a foreign land.

But throughout the quiet centuries that followed, a faithful God, in his compassion for his fallen world, preserved life in the stump of Jesse. When the time fully came, God sent his Son, a true descendant of Jesse, to be born in the town of Bethlehem and to rule on David's throne forever. Jesus came as a king, to go into battle with hell itself on our behalf, to conquer death and bring life and immortality to light. Jesus came and grew to bear fruit—the fruit of believers, his dear redeemed children. Though the world may stubbornly believe otherwise, Jesus Christ is very much alive and brings the fruit of his work—eternal blessings—to all who believe in his name.

**Lord Jesus, David's son yet David's Lord, rule in our hearts by your Word so that we live in repentance and faith. Lead us by your Spirit to look eagerly for your return and the kingdom you have promised. Amen.**



DECEMBER 2

# An Offspring of Eve

*[God said] "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*

As the song says, it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. But what kind of Christmas is it looking like? City sidewalks are brightly dressed in holiday style, and shoppers are rushing home with their treasures, but city streets are also haunted by crime, and economic uncertainties are sending workers home with their worries. Silver bells are ringing, and people passing are meeting smile after smile (at least under their face coverings), but more often than not those sounds and smiles are hiding underlying hurts and pains.

Yes, it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, but exactly what kind of Christmas is it looking like?

The answer to that question really depends on who's asking it, doesn't it? For people who aren't Christians, the spiritual offspring of Satan, this Christmas isn't looking the greatest. They can focus only on the externals of Christmas. They have no choice but to look to themselves when dealing with problems and frustrations and insecurities. No, it's not looking like the greatest of Christmases to them.

But for you and me who are Christians, spiritual offspring of the woman named Eve, this Christmas is beginning to look just as good as those that have gone before. By God's grace you and I can focus on the Christ Child, that special offspring of Eve who engaged Satan in spiritual combat and won. Satan appeared to inflict a fatal blow to Jesus when he died on the cross, or, in the words of our text, when Satan "struck his heel." Satan seemed to have won the battle. But, by his resurrection from the dead on Easter Sunday, Jesus showed that he was the one who had inflicted the fatal wound and "crushed the head" of Satan. And it all happened just as God said it would when he spoke the words of our text to Satan in the Garden of Eden.

By defeating Satan, Jesus has won forgiveness for our sins and our heavenly Father's blessing in this life, and has secured an eternal home for us in heaven when this life is over. That's a real source of comfort and security for time and eternity.

Yes, it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, and because of Jesus, that special offspring of the woman, it will be a good one.

**Lord, thank you for fulfilling your Word and sending your Son Jesus, the offspring of a woman, to be our victorious Savior, whose birth and victory over Satan makes every Christmas a good one. Amen.**





DECEMBER 3

# God's Covenant with Noah

*[God said] "But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you." Genesis 6:18*



Noah's ark is a popular children's theme. Pictures of a smiling Noah, happy animals, and a colorful rainbow decorate nurseries and preschools. But this cute caricature obscures the message of mankind's sin and God's grace. The ark was not a floating zoo. It was how God saved Noah and his family from his judgment on the world.

Noah lived during turbulent and uncertain times. Things seemed somewhat normal on the surface. People went about their daily

lives, gathering for meals and celebrating life events, but the fabric of society was coming apart. People had abandoned God, and every inclination of their hearts was only evil all the time. Evil hearts overflow with murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, and slander. Noah pleaded with people to repent, but they refused.

God was grieved, and he set a day to destroy all people through a worldwide flood. But God had mercy on Noah and his family. He directed Noah to build a large boat, or ark, which would save Noah, his family, and two of every kind of animal. God's promise of a rescue comforted Noah and helped him endure the evil around him as he awaited the coming destruction.

Our times are like Noah's. People's hearts, including ours, have become hard and calloused. Society is unraveling as people let their wicked and greedy hearts give way to every form of evil. And though God sends economic downturns, natural disasters, and deadly diseases to warn us that he has set a time for this world to be destroyed, most refuse to repent. We blindly go about our daily lives oblivious of the impending doom.

But in his mercy, God provides a rescue. He sent his holy Son, Jesus Christ, to pay the penalty for everyone's sins by dying on the cross. God promises that all who trust in Jesus' redemptive work will be saved. In the same way that the ark saved Noah and his family from watery graves, Jesus saves us from the coming day of judgment.

When we view the nativity, it's easy to miss the important message of our sin and God's grace. God sent the baby Jesus to rescue us from destruction. The nativity reminds us to reflect on our own hearts, repent of our sins, and find comfort and peace in our Savior Jesus.

**Heavenly Father, we thank you for the rescue from sin and death that you provide in Jesus. Through Jesus, protect us from the coming judgment and give us peace and confidence during turbulent and uncertain times. Amen.**



DECEMBER 4

# An Everlasting Covenant with Abraham

*[God said] "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you." Genesis 17:7*

In this world of ours, time is a commodity, precious and valuable because there is only so much of it. The time of our childhood, carefree and simple, comes to an end all too soon. The intimate togetherness of married life may be our bedrock for many years, but eventually that too comes to an end. Our healthy time, our strong and vigorous time, our physically active and mentally involved time—in some cases it burns out quickly, and in other cases it simply fades away, but in every case it comes to an end.

Abraham was thinking about time. God had called him to move to the land of Canaan when he was 75 years old, but now he was 99 years old and time was passing by. The promises God had made of a great land and a great nation and a great savior were 25 years old. Perhaps time was running out for Abraham? Perhaps time was running out for God's promises?

But God was going to lift the limits of time! God came to the musing Abraham and declared that his covenant, his binding promises, were everlasting. The land that God would give Abraham would be his forever. The nation God would make of Abraham would last forever. The king who would come from Abraham would rule forever. A beautiful and perfect life relying on God's deep love would be lived forever. God reminded Abraham, "Christ is coming! And through the saving work of Christ, God's ancient covenant is established as everlasting."

An everlasting nation from Abraham's line? Paul explains in Galatians that "those who have faith are children of Abraham." Moreover, in his book of Revelation, John describes those believers in the everlasting heaven as "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."

An everlasting king descended from Abraham? Again, in Revelation, John hears the angels shout about Christ: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever."

An everlasting homeland for Abraham's children? In Revelation, John describes this vision of Christ our King: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away . . . [and] He who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making everything new!"

Time without limits, time without chains, time unbound! In Christ, who died for your sins and rose again, God guarantees that his promises to care for you and love you and keep you close to him in faith and fill your life with joy and purpose and significance—this is your everlasting reality.

**Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and make time new for us, so that, with you, we enjoy the glorious freedom of 'everlasting.' Amen.**





DECEMBER 5

# A Substitute for Isaac

*Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them [Abraham and his son Isaac] went on together. Genesis 22:8*

In Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount," he addressed his followers, as recorded in Matthew 5-7. In Genesis 22, I see another "Sermon on the Mount" that the Lord preached to Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah and ultimately to me.

While Abraham referred to himself as "dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27), the Bible calls him God's friend (James 2:23). Because Abraham believed that God could raise the dead (Hebrews 11:19), the Holy Spirit numbered him among the heroes of faith.

Yet it's not Abraham or his good example in whom I trust. I thank *God* that he nurtured a vibrant faith in Abraham's heart, a faith that did not question God's command to sacrifice Isaac, a faith that led Abraham to tell Isaac that God himself would provide the sacrificial lamb. And although Genesis 22:1 tells me, "Sometime later God tested Abraham," Scripture ultimately focuses on Messiah, the divine Substitute whom God provided on *the* mountain of the Lord.

Though I've considered this Bible account many times, it's vital that I focus not on Abraham's willing obedience or on Isaac's complicity, but on God's sermon on Mount Moriah.

God preached to Abraham and Isaac that blood needed to be shed for forgiveness to be given, and that a Substitute would provide life amid death. On a Passover Friday outside Jerusalem, the Lord preached another sermon on another mount. In Christ's cry, "It is finished!" the Lord graciously provided salvation for me and for the whole world through his divine Substitute.

How often I view that grace to me with reckless prodigality. I refuse to take to heart Jesus' assurance that I'm forgiven. I waver in trusting his promises to love me and provide for all my needs. I excuse my pet sins and complain about the sins of others. I place myself center stage instead of yielding to his will and wanting his Kingdom to come to me and many others.

Thankfully, Jesus tells me in his Word that I can't out-sin his forgiveness. I can't reverse Christ's commitment to me. I can't hide from his pledge and promise to seek and to save me and to welcome me always and unconditionally. The God of free and faithful grace provided the Lamb. Jesus is the Substitute whom God provided on the mountain of the Lord.

Abraham and Isaac worshiped God and walked down Mount Moriah together, grateful for the substitute the Lord provided. Both anticipated the advent of Messiah, *the* Substitute through whom "all nations on earth will be blessed." As I give thanks for the Lord's grace to me and eagerly read his Word, I say no to sin's snares, smile in all circumstances, and prepare for his coming at Christmas and his return in glory. He's already provided everything I'll ever need.

**Jesus, you are gracious and good to me each day. Through your perfect life and sinless death, you are my Substitute. Give me peace with God and a joyful outlook through your Word. Forgive my doubts and sins, and fill my heart with humble thanks as you continue to provide all I need. Amen.**



DECEMBER 6

# A Stairway in Jacob's Dream

*Taking one of the stones there, [Jacob] put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. Genesis 28:10-12*

What if there really were a stairway to the sky? Ask the “Jacobs” of this world—all who are as alone, ashamed, and afraid as Jacob that night—what they’d give for such a thing. What if there were a way to rise above all this? What if there were a God willing to climb all the way down to us?



Under the cloud of all the lies he’d told, Jacob was fleeing the land of promise where he had a place, a future, and a name. And the God of all grace chose that night, of all nights, to peel back the veil and to speak to the deepest fears in Jacob’s small heart. From the top of the impossibly long flight of stairs that Jacob saw in his dream, the God of his fathers became the God of him too.

“I will bless all of the world through your descendant. I will watch over you, and I will bring you back home. I promise.”

The Old Testament enjoys a fascinating afterlife in the New. Imagine that you are the Nathanael of John’s Gospel. You are, as Jesus said, a “true Israelite.” It’s the greatest compliment of your life. Long have you prayed the prayer of all true Israelites. You like to pray under a fig tree because fig trees are a symbol for Israel. Jacob’s name was changed to Israel because he “struggled with God.” And under your little tree, so do you. You pray for Messiah to come.

One day your brother grabs you by the collar saying, “We’ve found him! He’s the one!” But when you hear that this teacher is from Nazareth, you know it’s all wrong. “What good can come from there?”

Then you meet him. He looks right through you and declares you free of Jacob’s guile. That is generous. You ask, “How do you know me?” He says, “I saw you under the fig tree.” Before Philip had come to disturb Nathanael’s prayer, his sleep, his life, Jesus saw him. Jesus heard him. Clearly, something both private and astonishing prompts Nathanael’s confession. He leaps past calling Jesus a great teacher, a true prophet, or worker of wonders. “Rabbi, you are the Son of God!”

“You will see greater things than this,” Jesus replied. “You will see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” Greater than mounded fish or cleaned-up lepers, Nathanael would see the Son of God suspended between earth and heaven. He would witness the reconciling death of Jesus for this world. He would meet him alive after he had died. He would see that there’s a gleaming stairway bridging earth and heaven. Blessed be his name.

**Dear Lord Jesus, only Mediator between me and my God, please show me wonderful things in your Word as the Spirit opens my eyes and as the angels themselves attend me. As I gather with your people around the means of grace, may I learn to say with Jacob, “Surely, the LORD is in this place.” Amen.**



DECEMBER 7

## Joseph's Ornate Robe

*Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him. Genesis 37:3*

Although Joseph isn't a direct ancestor of Jesus, no doubt his family—and his robe—were a significant part of the family of Jacob, here called Israel, and so also a significant part of the family of Jesus.

It wasn't only the robe that caused problems in Joseph's family, but the robe did play its own role in the family drama. However you translate what kind of robe it was—ornate, richly ornamented, or a coat of many colors—what is evident about the robe is that it was made for someone who

wasn't going to get his hands dirty. Joseph was pampered and treated as special. This robe was a sign that "Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons."

I'm sure you're familiar with what came next. One day Jacob sent Joseph out to the fields to check on his brothers. When they saw him, they took his coat and threw him into a pit so they could think about what to do next. While they were thinking, they saw some merchants on their way to Egypt, so they sold Joseph to them. They took his coat, tore it, dipped it in goat blood, and took it back to their father. And while Jacob clung to the blood-soaked coat, they now clung with confidence to the thought that they were done with their brother's coat, his special treatment, and their own flesh and blood.

But God kept Joseph alive, even blessed him, through the suffering of slavery and imprisonment, all so that he could protect the family of Israel. And through their descendant Jesus, God protected the fate of the whole sinful world.

God sent his only beloved Son into the world of sin because he loved the sinful people of the world profoundly. Instead of wearing an ornate cloak, Jesus was clothed in human flesh. He suffered the rejection of his own people. But more than that, Jesus suffered the punishment of hell when he bore the penalty for the world's sin on the cross and shed his precious blood. Jesus left his home knowing all that he would suffer so that you would be called part of his own family.

Through the blessing of your baptism, you have been clothed with a much more beautifully ornamented coat—the robe of Jesus' righteousness. And that robe is proof of the eternal love that God has for you as his own dear child.

**Dear Jesus, thank you for making me a part of your family and giving me the robe of righteousness through my baptism. Continue to lead me back to my baptism and the peace of your forgiveness that leads to eternal life. Amen.**



DECEMBER 8

# Moses and the 10 Commandments

*And God spoke all these words: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." Exodus 20:1-3*

Do you ever struggle to want to obey God's commands? Shouldn't the question rather be worded: When *don't* you struggle to want to obey God's commands? My whole life is a sordid record of how that stubborn donkey of my sinful flesh within me has bucked my Creator's will at every turn. Yes, I struggle to want to obey God's commands—all the time! And I know you do too.

It's not as if we don't know God's will for us. Many of us have had the 10 Commandments and their meanings memorized since early childhood. But it's hard to obey. Our sin-tainted reason views God's commands not as blessings, but as burdens, dreary restrictions and regulations that will prevent us from being happy, from living life to its fullest, from being all that we can be. We don't want to do any of that.

That is why we so desperately need Christmas. We are by nature slaves to sin. We need to be saved from our slavery. The alternative is terrifying.

Consider what the Israelites saw and heard at Mount Sinai as God prepared to speak his law to them: thunder, lightning, a thick cloud, a loud trumpet blast. The people trembled with fear. God was serious. The threat of his law was clear: Obey, or else!

But notice how God begins. Before he speaks any word of law, he speaks pure gospel. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." Not "Here's what you have to do," but "Look at who I am and what I have done for you!"

"I am the LORD." His grace to sinners is free and unfailing. "I am . . . your God." He had made them his people and had promised to be their God". . . who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." He had freed the slaves! They had seen with their own eyes the 10 plagues, the Red Sea. He had done it all. Who wouldn't want to serve that Lord?

It's no different for us, except that our slavery to sin is more horrible than any earthly, physical slavery. It leads inexorably to eternal death in hell. But Christmas is all about who our God is and what he has done for us. He—Jesus—is our Savior. He did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Who wouldn't want to serve that Lord in response? We call it gospel motivation. As Paul puts it, "But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance" (Romans 6:17).

**Dear Lord Jesus, thanks to you, we have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. And because of who you are and what you have done for us, we see that as a very good thing. Amen.**





# Rahab's Life Is Spared



*Now the men had said to [Rahab], "This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us unless, when we enter the land, you have tied this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and unless you have brought your father and mother, your brothers and all your family into your house." Joshua 2:17-18*

For secular historians, the walls of Jericho represent an artifact without precedent. The barricades were six feet thick and stretched about 50 feet above ground level. This fortress offers the earliest evidence of technology used for purely military purposes. Today's swarming drones, robot infantry, and hypersonic missiles descend from those mudbrick barriers. For 3,000

years, people continued to dedicate untold energy to engineering warfare. Yet we can still return to the rubble of Jericho for a beautiful reminder of the peace we have through God's love.

The first Israelites at Jericho were not massive armies marching and blowing trumpets. Instead, they were a single pair of scouts who hid in the home of a prostitute named Rahab. Rahab concealed the spies and deceived the king's agents who inspected her property. This woman's actions demonstrated her faith in the plan and power of Israel's God. "I know that the LORD has given this land to you," Rahab told the men whose lives she had saved. "The LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below."

Rahab also enabled these infiltrators to escape the city walls. She let them down with a rope made of scarlet thread. The spies promised to protect Rahab's household if that same red cord hung in her window. Later, invading Israelites destroyed every other living thing in Jericho. Because of the scarlet cord, Rahab's sign of trust in the one and only God, they spared her family. God honored this former prostitute with a place in the Messiah's bloodline. She is one of only five women mentioned in Matthew's genealogy of Christ. Rahab's faith saved her from destruction and gave her a place in the family of God.

That scarlet cord echoes the blood of the sacrificed lamb at the Passover. Enslaved Israelites used that blood to paint their doorframes. That marking was a testimony of their obedience to God and their faith in him for salvation. That crimson color also pooled at the foot of Calvary. The sinless Savior's blood declared Christ's devotion to his Father's plan for our salvation. Jesus' perfect life and death provided eternal deliverance for all mankind. Our bondage to sin ended forever at Christ's cross.

Despite her past sinful lifestyle, God redeemed Rahab and chose her to be his instrument. Her act of courage, rooted in faith, rescued her relatives and Joshua's spies. Despite our many failures, our merciful Creator won our salvation with his holy Son's blood. Our broken world engineers increasing turmoil and strife. Our heavenly Father has provided the only true plan for lasting peace.

**Lord, please allow me to exhibit the calm contentment I have through Christ alone. Use my life of thanks in service to you. Amen.**



DECEMBER 10

# Ruth Joins the Savior's Family Tree

*Then Naomi took [Ruth's] child in her arms and cared for him. The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!" And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. Ruth 4:16-17*

On our farm was an apple tree that had different colors of apples. The explanation was that the original tree had several other varieties grafted into it. When my grandfather was a young man, he spliced dormant branches from different apple trees into the original. When the apparently lifeless stick was bound tightly, the older tree provided the root and trunk, while the younger or newer branch produced its own fruit. Decades later, I could find no evidence that grafting ever occurred—except for the existence of multiple types of apples.

The line of the Savior Jesus was promised and fulfilled through many generations. In the account of Ruth, we see how a woman who was not from God's chosen people was grafted into the family tree of the Savior. A man and wife from Bethlehem, Elimelek and Naomi, moved to Moab during a drought. Their sons both married Moabite women. After the death of her husband and her sons, Naomi was prepared to return to Israel alone. Given the option, one of the daughters-in-law stayed in Moab, but Ruth joined Naomi. She pledged, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."

While Ruth was not born as part of the tribe of Judah, she had married into their family, picking up their culture and lifestyle. More importantly, she became a believer. Not only did she commit to being a daughter to Naomi, but she confessed strongly her belief in God. Both Naomi and Ruth continued to demonstrate their trust in God. Through a complex sequence of events, a relative of Elimelek named Boaz married Ruth. He also displayed trust in God's promises to preserve his people. Boaz served as a kinsman-redeemer, first showing kindness to Ruth, then eventually becoming her husband and maintaining the family line of Elimelek. Ruth and Boaz were blessed with a son.

Obed, the son, would become the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David, King of Judah. The city of Bethlehem would later be the destination for another couple, Joseph and Mary. Their son, Jesus, from the house and line of David, was the Messiah, the Savior that God promised from the fall into sin. While we were separated from God because of sin, Jesus redeemed us, grafting us into a family to which we didn't belong. Like Ruth being grafted into the line of Jesus in an earthly family, we are grafted into God's family of believers.

**Dear Savior Jesus, thank you for grafting me into your redeemed family. Strengthen me through your Word that I may be used to connect others to you. Amen.**





DECEMBER 11

# Samuel Anoints David King



*So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David. Samuel then went to Ramah. 1 Samuel 16:13*

Do you remember how you felt when you held your first driver's license? You got the learner's permit, practiced parallel parking, endured the classroom sessions, passed the written exam, and then made it through the behind-the-wheel test. What a feeling! That license was proof of readiness. You were equipped for the task of driving.

Were you? Did your parents stop worrying because you had the license? If your parents were like mine, and if you ran a four-way stop sign on the way to your behind-the-wheel test like I did, then I'm guessing they continued worrying for quite some time!

In the Old Testament, anointings were performed on newly chosen prophets, priests, and kings. An anointing signified separation to the Lord for one of those particular tasks, as well as a divine equipping for it. Samuel's anointing of David marked the fact that he would become the greatest king of God's chosen people. I'm sure everyone wondered if the youngest brother and shepherd boy was really ready, but as one of the forerunners to the Savior, he was specially chosen, separated, and equipped.

We too have been anointed. At our baptisms, we were washed with water and the Word. The Holy Spirit marked us as God's own, equipping us to serve. We regularly worship, study Scripture, and pray. Yet we continue to fail in our callings to honor, serve, and obey. We drive through so many of God's stop signs that we lose count. Are you worried about your readiness? Are you in need of reaffirmation of God's having equipped you for the task of serving him?

Samuel's anointing of David is a foreshadowing of Jesus being anointed as our ultimate Prophet, Priest, and King. This is on our hearts and minds during Advent. Jesus' perfect life and death are ours through faith and by God's grace alone. We too are equipped!

Jesus is referenced as "the Anointed One" in Isaiah 61, the same section of Scripture he read about himself in the temple at Nazareth in Luke 4. The fulfillment of this prophecy is a daily reminder of our baptismal anointing, and it gives us confidence as we look to his coming at Christmas and on the Last Day: "The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor." This good news is our good news. We have been anointed to serve! To that end, may God continue to bless us.

**Hail to the Lord's Anointed, great David's greater Son!  
Hail, in the time appointed, his reign on earth begun!  
He comes to break oppression, to set the captives free,  
To take away transgression, and rule in equity. Amen. (CW 93:1)**



DECEMBER 12

# A King from David's Line

*[The Lord said to David] "When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." 2 Samuel 7:12-13*

King David planned to build a house for the Lord. Inspired by God's Spirit, David had been both architect and contractor, drawing up blueprints for a glorious house with the best of everything, the temple of the Lord. No longer would God live symbolically among his people in a mere tent, as he had since Israel's years of wilderness wandering.

But God had better plans. Since David had the blood of Israel's enemies on his hands, he would not build the temple. His son Solomon would. Instead, God would build *David* a house, not of wood and stone, but of kings. From Solomon would descend a dynasty. Son after son would sit on David's throne. His flesh and blood would rule Israel, God promised, forever.

But "forever" appeared to last about 400 years, years of decline broken only occasionally by a few good kings who taught and modeled faithfulness to God. Soon Israel split in two, and David's heirs ruled only the southern half, Judah. With each generation they grew wickeder and weaker. Judah's second-last king, Jehoiachin, became a trophy captive of a greater king of a greater kingdom, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon—while a royal uncle, Zedekiah, warmed the throne of David as a humiliated placeholder put there by Nebuchadnezzar. For rebelling against Babylon, Zedekiah was blinded. His last sight was the execution of his sons. So much for a throne forever.

Or so it seemed. David's line continued quietly from son to son, as Judah passed from occupier to occupier. The Persians replaced the Babylonians and allowed remnant Jews to return to their land. The Greeks displaced the Persians, and the Romans pushed aside the Greeks. Judah, now called Judea, remained just another province in someone else's empire. For six centuries David's throne stood empty.

But God's promise endured. In Bethlehem of Judea, great David's greater son, Jesus, was born to the virgin Mary. Mary and her husband, Joseph, were both descended from David, and their son, though a king's heir, was just a carpenter from Nazareth.

God kept his promise to David of a throne forever. Mary's son, David's flesh and blood, is the Son of God, the Savior of all. He was born to live and die in our place, so that, in David's phrase, God would remove our sins from us "as far as the east is from the west." Jesus then rose from his grave to certify it all true: we are redeemed and forgiven. We are citizens of God's kingdom. He rules in the hearts of all who believe. We are a spiritual Israel ruled by King Jesus from a heavenly throne that will—yes!—last forever.

**Eternal King Jesus, by your Spirit and your Word, establish forever your throne in my heart. Amen.**





DECEMBER 13

## Elijah's Sacrifice to the Lord



*At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." 1 Kings 18:36-37*

If you could go back to Mount Carmel and observe the events of that day, what would you experience? I imagine sheer chaos. Four hundred fifty prophets of Baal, 400 prophets of Asherah, plus the people that

had assembled from all over Israel, gather on the mountain. The deal is struck, and the prophets of Baal start their work. Midday approaches, and nothing happens. They frantically shout and dance harder, then slash themselves with weapons until evening approaches. What chaos! And nothing comes of it! What is going through the minds of the spectators? When is it enough? The chaos breeds more chaos!

Do you know the feeling? If you need a reminder, one only has to watch the news for a few minutes or browse the reality TV shows. One is more outrageous than the next! When is it enough?

Let's return to Mt. Carmel. Elijah finally steps forward and speaks his prayer. Elijah has no doubts about God's sovereignty. Notice that the word "if" never crosses his lips. God is sovereign, and God is turning the hearts of his people.

Elijah's prayer is also ours. God is sovereign, despite all the chaos we experience around us. Just as on Mt. Carmel, we may have to put up with the chaos. No matter. Our trust in God is not misplaced.

Reading a bit further in our text, we see God's awesome answer. Fire falls from heaven and consumes everything. No doubts remain in the hearts of the crowd. Their response is clear: "The LORD—he is God!"

God's ultimate response may not be as dramatically visible, but it is even more powerful and miraculous. Instead of fire, God sent his Son, Jesus Christ. God became man to fulfill God's plan to defeat sin, death, and hell and bring salvation to the world. It's by the sacrifice of Jesus that I can also shout, "The LORD—he is God!"

What finally happens on Mt. Carmel? The crowd has no doubts about the true God. We take note of Elijah's request in his prayer. He asks that the people know that God is sovereign and that he is turning their hearts back to him.

What a story the crowd on Mt. Carmel had to tell! We have a story to tell too. Elijah's prayer is also ours. God is turning hearts back to him. God is working through our witnessing.

The altar reminds us of God's power and grace. It reminds me of the sacrifice God made for my salvation. It also reminds me of the strength God displayed that day on Mt. Carmel.

**Dear Lord, you are God! Amid the chaos of this world, you have demonstrated your power in your Son, Jesus. Use my witnessing to turn hearts back, until the day when you return. Amen.**



DECEMBER 14

# Josiah's Reformation

*Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the temple of the LORD with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the LORD. 2 Kings 23:1-2*

A little more than 500 years ago, Martin Luther unrolled the 95 Theses and nailed them to the church door in Wittenberg, beginning the Protestant Reformation. Some 2,000+ years before Luther, King Josiah unrolled a scroll containing the book of the covenant, leading to a reformation in the kingdom of Judah.



Josiah's predecessors had led God's people into generations of idolatry, leaving the land littered with idolatrous shrines, statues, and relics. The king's concern for repair and upkeep to the temple led to the discovery of a lost scroll containing God's Word, and as the scroll was read, the message had a profound effect on Josiah. Upon realizing the extent to which he and the rest of God's chosen people had deviated from God's commands, Josiah tore his robes and, with a responsive heart, humbled himself before the Lord.

He sought guidance from the Lord, called the people together, and read the book of the covenant. In front of the people and in the presence of the Lord, Josiah renewed the covenant and embarked on a nationwide housecleaning, tearing down and destroying the idols and altars to false gods. The people of Judah, under the faithful leadership of King Josiah, rededicated themselves to the Lord.

Like Josiah, when we are confronted by God's law, we cannot help but see how far we have strayed from his commands. But also like Josiah, we have the opportunity to humble ourselves before the Lord.

As we consider the Word this Advent season, we are reminded of the promise God made and kept in the form of Jesus, his Son. With a responsive heart, let us rededicate ourselves to him.

We can put out the fires of greed and topple the altars to commercialism that sprout up this time of year. We can tear down shrines to hatred erected during the past election season and unravel the tapestries of anger and resentment that we have woven against those around us over longstanding grudges.

Like Josiah, we have the opportunity to return to the Word to see that God has fulfilled his covenant and sent us salvation. Furthermore, in his Word, God assures us of the forgiveness of our sins and renews us to live lives dedicated to him. By the grace of God, he works a reformation of our hearts, bringing peace and joy.

Finally, as Josiah recognized the great treasure contained in that scroll that had lain hidden for so many years, he knew that it must be shared with all the people of the kingdom. Likewise, as we look forward to the advent of our Lord and Savior, we seek to share that message of joy far and wide.

**Dear Lord, Thank you for keeping your promise and sending your Son to be our Savior. Strengthen us through your Word, send your Holy Spirit to comfort our repentant hearts, and empower us through the gospel to rededicate ourselves wholly and only to you. Amen.**



DECEMBER 15

# Jonah's Life Is Spared

*Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Jonah 1:17*

What saves you? Is it a simple cup of caffeine on an early morning? Has it been the mask across your face? Perhaps it's something else that falls between allowing you to function more comfortably in God's beautiful creation and keeping you from your last breath. Your "saving" comes in so many ways and often when you least expect it. But it always gives you what you lack.

Lacking was exactly how the prophet Jonah felt as he was bobbing up and down like a buoy in the middle of the stormy, sinister sea. After he found himself on a

boat headed in the opposite direction from where God had instructed him to go, he was tossed overboard in a last-ditch effort to save the rest of the lives on board. But God rescued. In a wild whale-like way, when Jonah saw a watery grave, God swallowed Jonah with life. God saved.

And do you know that you lack, like Jonah? It's not just about those material matters and the mask across your face. Jonah's disobedience and the sin he was called to confront is evidence. His heart was not in line with God's will. The wickedness of the Ninevites invoked God's righteous judgment. And even more sobering, nothing has changed for people years later. You lack the ability to meet God's demands perfectly. And your lacking means you should sink down to an eternal grave.

Yet he saves you. The Lord allows you to see how much you lack in order to experience how magnificently he loves you. It was Jesus who lacked comfort, his heavenly dwelling, and even a relationship with his heavenly Father—all for you. It was Jesus who lacked—his very life in a grave for three days—so that you could lack nothing in the eyes of the Lord.

And it's not a matter of lacking anymore. It's a matter of having so much that your hearts and minds are made ready for his coming again. There's no doubt that you're going to celebrate Jesus' first coming very soon at Christmas. But let's not forget, as he came once, he will surely come back for you who are being filled in every way. You have been swallowed up by the forgiveness of sins. It truly saves you from the grave forever.

When you remember the saving of Jonah with God's whale-like creature, don't forget how it points to Christ's lack-less love. It prepares you, no matter how many Christmas celebrations lie ahead and what earthly comforts they may be lacking. This is a saving act unlike any other. This is your Lord doing something eternal, something for your very life today and something you'll see fulfilled when he comes again.

**Dear Lord, the power you displayed as you saved Jonah in the belly of a fish reminds us how much we lack and how magnificently you save. Keep us mindful of Jesus' saving act for us, which makes us prepared to see him when he comes again. Amen.**



DECEMBER 16

# Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego

*Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them. Daniel 3:26-27*



"It's getting hot in here." Those words signal that something's not right. What's the cause of the heat? Maybe fire. Maybe heated words. Both can lead to scary situations, as we will see in the lesson for today. Take careful note of how the Most High God—the only true God—rescues from the penetrating heat of mankind's conceit.

In the early 500s BC, King Nebuchadnezzar had built a commanding reputation. Babylon was awesome—enormous colorful walls, stunning gardens, massive defensive gates. His army expanded the reach of his empire. When he decreed that everyone should worship the 90-foot image he had crafted, he demanded obedience . . . or else. His threat was death by incineration.

When he heard that three Jewish exiles—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—refused to worship his idol, Nebuchadnezzar became enraged. How dare they! Things got hot. The flames were so intense that Babylonian soldiers died as they threw the men into the furnace.

That's what happens when pride and anger mix. Things may just smolder at first, but rage can ignite in an instant. Heed the warning of how consuming sin can be.

The three men faced the flames with an equally intense expression of faith. "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace," they said, "the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

What confidence! They had every reason to trust that God would deliver them safely from this blast of Nebuchadnezzar's fury. Their trust even transcended earthly rescue. "Even if he does not," they declared. Even if God allowed them to die in the furnace, they trusted the promises that God would bring them safely to a life of eternal peace and safety. Remember this great testimony of faith. Make it your own, no matter how hot things may get.

God sent a divine messenger into the furnace to show that he was still in supreme control. "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods," Nebuchadnezzar cried out. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego walked out—with no smell of fire on them—to the glory of the God they served.

The fire ornament on the Jesse tree is symbolic of the fiery furnace. By divine intervention, God turned this image of destruction into a sign of his deliverance. Jesus, the Son of God, triumphed over the flames of hell. He continues to save all who trust in his power to rescue from sin's scorching fury.

**Dear Lord God, preserve us from the destructive power of sin. Forgive us in your mercy. Keep us strong in faith and hope and love as witnesses of your divine power to save. Amen.**



# Daniel's Life Is Spared



*Daniel answered, "May the king live forever! My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, Your Majesty." The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. Daniel 6:21-23*

When you hear lion, what images come to mind? Simba and *The Lion King*? Aslan, the great lion of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*?

Lions are some of God's most impressive creatures. The King of the Jungle, male lions can grow to 4 feet tall and 6-8 feet long. They

can weigh up to 350 pounds. To achieve such size, and to maintain it, lions eat pounds of meat. And they hunt in the night.

Imagine spending an entire night sealed in a den with a pride of hungry lions. Sounds like certain death. But not for God's Old Testament prophet Daniel. Daniel's enemies in the Babylonian government convinced King Darius to decree that anyone praying to any god or man except Darius should be thrown into a lion's den. Daniel's enemies knew no human law would keep him from praying to his Savior God. And when Daniel did pray, Darius was forced to follow his own decree and throw him into a lion's den.

Certain death? Hardly. Daniel spent an easier night in the lion's den than Darius spent in his plush palace. Darius tossed and turned. Daniel enjoyed God's powerful protection. God shut the lion's mouths. And he kept his servant safe.

That was not the first time, nor will it be the last time, that God shut the mouth of a lion. Yes, God can save his people from danger. Sometimes he saves us as he saved Daniel, keeping us safe from danger and extending our time of grace on earth. Sometimes he saves us by taking us to his side in heaven. That is the ultimate rescue.

While on this earth, we have an enemy, a lion, who is far more dangerous than an earthly lion. The Bible describes a roaring lion who prowls around looking to devour us. His chief weapon of attack is accusation. He also hunts in the night. With cruel accusation, he attacks our rest and peace. "How can you expect God to forgive such a sinner as you?"

The Accuser isn't wrong when he points out our sins. However, he is wrong in questioning God's forgiveness. The Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Revelation 5) has shut the lion's mouth for us. He has silenced his accusations against us.

You see, the baby whose birth we will soon celebrate is true God and man. He will live a holy life for us. He will die an innocent death for us. He will suffer and die for our sins. Our Savior Jesus will rise from the dead to prove the price for sin has been paid in full. When our Accuser accuses, we point to our Savior Jesus. With his forgiveness, he has shut that Lion's mouth too.

**Thank you, Jesus, for using your power and love to save your servant Daniel. Continue to protect us every day. Thank you, Jesus, for silencing the accusations of the devil by forgiving my sins. In the peace of forgiveness, help me to resist sin and stand up for you like your servant Daniel did. Amen.**



DECEMBER 18

# Nehemiah Rebuilds the Wall

*Then I [Nehemiah] said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps, and lyres. Nehemiah 2:17, 12:27*

When God's people were allowed by Cyrus to return to Jerusalem after their 70 years of exile in Babylon, they were coming back to a city that had been utterly destroyed seven decades earlier. In the meantime, surrounding peoples (many enemies of God and his people) had filled in the void by moving into the city. Those neighboring people often hindered the people of Judah in the rebuilding process, making it so slow and difficult that God's people numerous times despaired and were slack in that rebuilding process.

Yes, they had finally completed building the temple, but only after God's grace provided them with the prodding preachers of Haggai and Zechariah, who called them to repent of their stinginess and slackness for failing to put God's house first. But the rebuilding of the city and reform of people's hearts continued to be a recurring theme. Yet, despite the people's sinfulness, God demonstrated his grace as he sent Nehemiah to call the people to repentance once again, to urge them to finish the walls around the city. These walls had lain in ruin, neglected by the people as more than 100 years had passed since the return from exile. Really? They had neglected this important task, procrastinating for more than 100 years. Really?

God sent Nehemiah to lead these sinful people to "repent and build that wall." They listened to God's spokesman and leader, Nehemiah, and overcame tremendous strife from within and without to build that wall in less than two months.

Those same walls were still in place some 400 years later as we turn the pages of Scripture to the New Testament. However, the repentant hearts and lives of God's people that had completed that wall with Nehemiah had given way to sinfulness and unrepentant hearts, both among the leaders of the temple and the descendants of the builders. The sins of the people and their unrepentant hearts had caused a "recurring" wall to be built. It was a wall of sin, a wall that separated man from God. *This* wall was one that needed to be torn down and destroyed.

Once again, God in his grace provided a powerful prophet, John the Baptist, to preach and perform a baptism of repentance. God was calling the people to turn from their sinful selves and return to their loving God. But even this was not enough to tear down the wall of sin as the people continued in their erring ways.

Enter Jesus. Jesus is a "wall-destroyer." Jesus tore down that wall of sin between us and God with his atoning sacrifice for sin. During this Advent season, God's grace continues to call us to repent and believe in Jesus the Savior.

**Dear Jesus, thank you for destroying the wall of sin that separated me from God. Allow me to listen and heed your calls to repent of my sins. May my heart and mind be fully prepared for your coming. Amen.**





DECEMBER 19

## Zechariah's Prayer Is Answered



*But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Luke 1:13, 17*

"Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers." "Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers." Country Western songs usually are not good sources of theology, and that is the case with the

preceding quotations. Unanswered prayers? From Scripture we know that God hears and answers all the prayers of his children. His answers are "yes," "no," and "later." There are no unanswered prayers for Christians.

Zechariah was a follower of the Lord who utilized prayer. As a priest, he prayed many times for many people. As a child of God, he undoubtedly spoke to God in prayer about numerous circumstances in his life. One such subject of prayer concerned his family. He and his wife, Elizabeth, had no children. You can imagine Zechariah petitioning the Lord to enlarge his family.

At a time when "Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old" (Luke 1:7), an angel appeared to Zechariah and announced that God had heard his prayer. God's answer to Zechariah's prayer was a miraculous "yes." Zechariah and Elizabeth would finally become parents! Their son, John the Baptist, would enjoy the blessing of being the special preparer of people for the public ministry of Jesus Christ.

John's preparatory work consisted of calling people to repentance, pointing them to Jesus as the Lamb of God, and baptizing them. Through his work, God changed the hearts of many people—turning them from sin and unbelief to faith and trust in the Savior who would live, die, and rise for them and their salvation.

It comes as no surprise to learn that today's ornament for the Jesse tree depicts praying hands. With hands folded or uplifted, God's people utilize the privilege of conversing with him through prayer. The Prayer of the Church for the Advent season in *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (page 123) can help maintain focus at this time of the year: "Move us to take to heart the words of John: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.' You sent your Son to redeem us from sin. Let this good news be our joy and strength. Use it to cheer the lonely, encourage the fearful, and give hope to the despairing. In these days before Christmas, spare us from the stress of deadlines and the frenzy of commercialism."

God is pleased to say "yes" to good and godly petitions like these. He is, after all, the God of whom the Bible says, "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Corinthians 1:20).

**Gracious God, how blessed we are that you speak to us through your holy Word. Lead us to be faithful in speaking to you in prayer and then being content with your answers to our requests. Amen.**

*Rev. James Pope serves Martin Luther College as a professor of social science, theology, and staff ministry.*



DECEMBER 20

# Mary to Be the Mother of Jesus

*But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus." Luke 1:30-31*

"Um, where is Jesus?" That's the question I asked when I was looking at the manger scene we annually set up in our house. The explanation was that my toddlers like to climb up to the nativity and play with the little figurines, and Baby Jesus is their favorite. They take him out and role-play with the Barbies and the Lego action figures, a rather strange scenario, I admit. And believe it or not, they are not super careful to clean up and put Baby Jesus back in the manger. I wish I had normal toddlers who remember to clean up after themselves! It didn't seem right! "You can't have a manger without Jesus! You can't lose Jesus. Without Jesus, it's not Christmas!" I said.



Have you lost Jesus this year? We sit in beautiful churches with beautiful decorations. We see a manger scene somewhere in the building, with Jesus and everything. We are reminded of the joy and peace and forgiveness and love of God in church. We leave our houses of worship with Jesus. How long does it take to lose him? Kids, work, schedules to keep, bills to pay . . . it doesn't take long, does it? But without Jesus, it's not life!

By the time that Mary and Joseph lived, God's people had been asking, "Um, where is Jesus?" It had been more than 400 years since God had spoken. There were no reminders, no prophets, just silence. Then into the silence, the angel Gabriel appears and makes the most incredible announcement: "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus." It is an announcement that changes everything, like hearing, "You're having a baby . . . you got the job . . . you won the sweepstakes!" Life will never be the same. It can't be! "Mary, Jesus is coming!"

A few years ago, a wealthy philanthropist made an announcement that would change life for a lot of people. He committed to donating 99% of his company's value to charity. That is an incredible gift! Not to minimize it, but it still left him nearly \$500 million to live on. In contrast, understand what Gabriel's announcement meant. God was not going to give 99% to win your forgiveness. He gave all he had when he gave Jesus. And without Jesus, it's not life.

One of my kids came bursting into the living room and shouted, "We found Jesus!" The manger scene was complete. Two thousand years ago, Gabriel burst into this world and said, "Jesus is coming." Life is now complete.

**Heavenly Father, you sent your angel to announce to Mary that she would be in the line of the Savior and be his mother. Thank you for changing everything with that announcement and making our lives complete. In his precious name, we pray. Amen.**



# Joseph Serves as Jesus' Father



*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*

Joseph, according to some traditions, is the patron saint of workers. He is also called the protector of the church and the patron saint of a happy death. That's quite a range, but there are a few more titles we could suggest.

Joseph, patron saint of fathers: This is a combination of the first two categories listed above, worker and protector, and a number of other roles. God gave Joseph a special role in the child's earthly life. He was the one to officially name him "Jesus," the one who will save people from their sins. He was the one who took Jesus to the temple for the official rites as an infant and later as a preteen to meet the scholars and teachers. In between, Joseph was the protector of Jesus, in a human sense, as he transported him to Egypt and back, and then up to Galilee to keep him safe. All the while he put daily bread on the table through his work as a carpenter.

Joseph, patron saint of fathers who listen to the angels: Joseph needed and received the counsel of God to carry out the roles God gave him. At each critical step, God sent an angel to direct and bless Joseph and his family. Being a father can be tough. God sent an angel to Manoah to help him raise a child that would be hard to handle, Sampson. God also sent an angel to Zechariah when he was about to surprise him with a son, John the Baptist.

Joseph, patron saint of stepfathers: "This child is not mine!" Joseph was ready to walk away from the greatest gift of all time. He didn't seem angry or bitter about the situation, but he planned to walk away from the family. He was trying to make the best of a bad situation by quietly, privately, and sadly just walking away. That is why fathers need to listen to the angels, especially when they are on the edge of making a huge mistake. This child is not yours, Joseph, you're right, but he is yours and you have a special role to play.

That child "conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. . . . Jesus . . . will save people from their sins." That first part of the angel's message is hard to grasp, but it is true, and the last part is pure joy. Because of this child, all mistakes, misunderstandings, doubts, fears, and desertions are forgiven, done, and paid for. And that means for all the children God puts under your wing, you can be the willing worker, protector, transport director, guardian, and father.

**Dear heavenly Father, help me to serve the special role you give me this Christmas season—to name that baby in the manger for all who sit around my table. He is Jesus, the one who saves us from our sins. Amen.**



DECEMBER 22

# John Points Out Jesus as the Messiah

*Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One." John 1:32-34*

I feel like a large amount of my childhood was spent at County Stadium, the previous ballpark of the Milwaukee Brewers. I have many memories there, including a vivid one from college. There were ten of us in the group that day, including one who was dating the daughter of a Brewers' coach. Because of this, our group was invited into the clubhouse postgame. What an experience! When it was time to leave, we were led by security out the player exit. Just outside the exit, hundreds of Brewers fans were waiting for player autographs. So nine of us walked out and ignored the requests of the children. One of our group, however, didn't ignore the kids. Instead, he began signing autographs. Did these fans know who that "player" really was? The fans really needed someone to reveal the true identity of this player. His autograph did little to raise the value of their memorabilia. In fact, it might have reduced it.

What is your value? By nature we are more worthless than a counterfeit autograph. Psalm 51:5 gives us a clear picture of our value. "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." Our perfection was scarred even before we took a breath outside our mother's womb.

In God's economy, we need perfection to enter heaven. Unfortunately, we had the fake autograph of sin written all over our heart. Since we've been born, we only continued our sinful ways. Our sinful nature yearns to find a solution on our own. It falsely tells us to try to make up for these sins and earn our value back. Yet none of this is possible on our own. Thankfully, God put his All-Star into our lives, and he has two things we need: an eraser and infinite value.

God revealed him throughout the pages of Scripture, specifically through the voice of John the Baptist. John had, and still has, a specific purpose. John 1:7 says, "He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe." John baptized Jesus and saw the dove descend on him. He knew Jesus was God's Chosen One. So he yelled out to people then and people now to get their pens ready. Jesus is the real deal. The Savior so long foretold was coming and has come. He is God's Chosen One. His perfect life, innocent death, and glorious resurrection make you new again. He takes your sins on himself and gives you his perfection. You will be autographed as a redeemed child of God because of Jesus. That autograph has infinite value.

So, this Advent and always, get your pens and your hearts ready. "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." He's coming!

**Thank you, Lord, for giving our broken lives infinite value through your Chosen One, Jesus. Help us to testify concerning that light to others this Advent season, just as John the Baptist did. Amen.**





DECEMBER 23

## Simeon Sees God's Light

*Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations."*  
Luke 2:28-31

To say that these verses of the Bible are familiar would be an understatement. In addition to their annual reading during Advent and Christmas, generations of Christians have sung the *Nunc Dimittis* following the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

To help us focus on the truths expressed by Simeon with fresh appreciation, let's step into his sandals. Think about the special

opportunity he was given. He held Baby Jesus in his arms! And more important than that moment of grace, the Holy Spirit enabled him to understand what Jesus meant for him, his people, and the world.

We pray for the same blessings this Christmas. Although it will only be by faith that we hold the Christ Child, we can know as Simeon did what this baby means for us. Simeon saw Jesus as God's "light" for him and for the whole world.

To see Jesus as God's salvation, we actually have to look at him through God's eyes. When the Father looked down at his Son lying in a manger in Bethlehem, he saw the only solution for sin. He dearly loved his Son, but he also loved you and me just as much. From the time he carefully created Adam and Eve, God had loved mankind. It broke his heart when they chose to disobey him. And since he is holy and just, he could not simply overlook what they had done. Their violation of his command required punishment. But instead of leaving them stranded in sin and condemned to hell, he planned to send his Son to save them. The child that Simeon held would satisfy God's justice. He would live a sinless life as a substitute for sinners and be punished for their sins.

May the Holy Spirit lead us to the same understanding about the baby in the manger. As Simeon places Jesus in our arms this Christmas, how can we also see him as "a light" for revelation to the Gentiles and the "glory" of Israel? Through the words of Jesus, our eyes will be opened to see him as Simeon did and to put our faith in him. A little more than 30 years later, Jesus would say, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12) The Light in our arms this Christmas brings light to our lives now and forever. The writer to the Hebrews further explains that the child in our arms is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being." We see God's face as we look at Mary's son. We know God's love as we hold him in our arms. Let that be God's gift to us this Christmas.

**Dear Jesus, with the arms of faith, may we hold you again this Christmas. Open our eyes to see you as Simeon saw you so long ago—as God's Light and our salvation. Amen.**

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



DECEMBER 24

# Shepherds Receive the Good News

*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 Palestine were often despised. Religious leaders looked down on them because the isolation demanded by their trade prevented them from following Jewish laws about diet and worship. Nearly everyone looked down on them because many shepherds were less than honest. They usually worked for someone else, so it was easy to make a little money on the side, selling wool or milk or even the animals themselves. You could always say that a few sheep fell into a ravine or were killed by wolves, and who could prove otherwise?

At night, several shepherds would often bring their flocks together and take turns guarding them while the others would sleep. We meet a group like that in our text. It was probably a normal night, quiet and cool with the deep, dark sky sequined with shimmering stars. Normal at least until an angel appeared. We can imagine the fear that suddenly gripped these shepherds. How would you feel if you were sitting around a campfire in a secluded field, when suddenly you were enveloped in a brilliant, white light, and an angel was there? I know I would have been just a little concerned!

The angel told the shepherds, "Do not be afraid." They felt great fear, but he had a cure for that: great joy. "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." The Jewish day begins at sundown, so when the angel said "today," he meant that very night. A Savior had been born "in the town of David," bringing to mind all the promises God had made to King David. The shepherds could go and see for themselves, and they would know they had found the right child when they found a baby lying in a manger, in a rough-hewn feeding trough for animals.

This was no ordinary birth announcement, even apart from the manner in which it was given. That's because this was no ordinary baby. He was indeed a real baby, a crying, hungry baby that had to be diapered. And yet, miracle of miracles, this baby was God in the flesh, the Savior, Christ the Lord, who would live and die and rise to take away the sin of the world.

Martin Luther, writing about these verses when he was in exile at the Wartburg Castle, was moved to ask, "What greater joy may a heart know than that Christ is given him as his very own?" The answer that we can give? None! By God's grace, we have found that baby in the manger through faith, and we rejoice that he is our Savior!

**Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child, Make thee a bed, soft, undefiled  
Within my heart, that it may be A quiet chamber kept for thee. Amen.**





DECEMBER 25

# Angels Proclaim Peace 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*

"Suddenly," after the long wait for God's timing for the Messiah ended . . . "Suddenly," after the angel's voice announced to stunned shepherds that Mary's newborn was the Lord himself in human flesh . . . "Suddenly," that single angel's voice becomes a thunderous chorus by a heavenly host. At their Lord's birth, an entire division of the heavenly army springs into glad service. And what a

message that army proclaims about our God in heaven!

"Glory" to the God who fills the whole universe, yet who humbly nurses at Mary's breast. "Glory" to the God who in unforced mercy took our flesh, as he begins to fulfill his own law in our place. "Glory" to the God who would one day allow the law's curse to crush him, so that it need not crush us.

And what a message they proclaim about the result of God's saving glory for the inhabitants of earth!

"Peace" offered to a world that in 4 BC, as well as 2000 AD, knows nothing on its own about real peace with God. "Peace" offered because that world can find this peace in no other name than the Christ Child's. "Peace" enjoyed in this world wherever the Spirit teaches hearts to trust the Father's goodwill revealed in the face of Jesus.

Is it any wonder such a large contingent of heaven's army would join that chorus? Is it any wonder as Christmas 2020 dawns—with all this year's perplexing problems—that this message of glory to God and peace on earth still needs to be sounded to comfort our own hearts? It is any wonder that the rest of this weary world needs to hear the message of that angel chorus, for God's goodwill through this infant is an invitation meant for all?

But the angel army has no second concert planned.

Instead, God has ordained in the water of baptism a new army of heralds. You and I—whose hearts by the gift of faith are Jesus' most delightful living nativity—we are the messengers privileged by Jesus' grace to repeat the hymn again: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace."

So, pray, dear army of God, for the courage to seize opportunities to speak of God's saving glory and the peace it brings! So, pray, dear army of God, for those God has sent, in his name and ours, to herald that message where we cannot go! So, pray, dear army of God, that God would use your school, MLC, to equip the next generation of faithful witnesses to add their voices to the chorus.

The heavenly army is delighted if God's earthly army borrows their chorus!

**Glory is still yours this Christmas Day, Lord, for lavish love revealed at Jesus' manger. Therefore, help our hearts rest in that peace on this Christmas Day and throughout the new year. Lord, open our lips—and the lips of the messengers we send—so that through us what reechoes around this world is the angelic chorus about your heavenly saving glory and the peace you offer the earth! Amen.**









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