

# ADVENT & CHRISTMAS



## Devotional Book 2011



MANY HANDS. ONE HEART.  
**DIAKON**  
LUTHERAN SOCIAL MINISTRIES

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We are grateful to the following people for providing reflections for this year's Advent/Christmas/Epiphany devotions:

Chaplain Virginia Biniek  
Chaplain Brenda Boyer  
Chaplain Theodore Cockley  
Chaplain Blaine Feightner  
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Chaplain Dianne Kareha  
Chaplain Colleen Kristula  
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Jean Ann Nelson  
Tyler Roach  
Ruth Savage  
Glenn Shafer  
Norine Shafer  
Richard Shafer  
Wendy Stivers



Advent/Christmas 2011

Dear Partner in Ministry:

We are pleased to share our Diakon devotional booklet with you.

Each of these reflections, developed for the Advent and Christmas season of 2011, was written by someone associated with Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries, particularly chaplains within our senior living communities and Diakon Hospice Saint John.

The reflections arise from the faith of the writers as they serve as part of Diakon each day. They hope their meditations bring hope and renewal to you.

As always, we acknowledge the dedication and talent of the Rev. Dr. Mark Oldenburg, dean of the chapel and professor of worship at The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, who edited and prepared the text for this booklet, our 14<sup>th</sup> such devotional.

We hope you enjoy and are inspired by this booklet and that it reminds you of the ministry of service Diakon carries out each day on your behalf.

God's blessings to you, your family, and your congregation during this season of the joy of Christ's birth.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark T. Pile".

Mark T. Pile, MSHA, MSW  
President/CEO

Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries

## DAILY PRAYER FOR ADVENT

### INVOCATION AND READING

In the name of the Father, and of the Son (+) and of the Holy Spirit.

**Amen**

Strengthen the weak hands  
**and make firm the feeble knees.**

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
**“Be strong, do not fear!**

Here is your God,  
**who will come and save you.”**

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
**and the ears of the deaf unstopped;**

then shall the lame leap like a deer,  
**and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.**

### TODAY’S LESSON

### TODAY’S REFLECTION

### PRAYERS

We give you thanks for the ways your reign of peace, joy, and justice is breaking through in this world. Thanks most particularly for ... Protect and nourish these precious signs.

We pray for those in special need of hope: all who suffer and most particularly for ... Comfort them and, where you can, use us as comforters.

### Prayer for the Time of Day

#### *Morning*

We give you thanks, heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ your dear Son, that you have protected us through the night from all danger and harm. We ask you to preserve and keep us, this day also, from all sin and evil, that in all our thoughts, words, and deeds we may serve and please you. Into your hands we commend our bodies and souls and all that is ours. Let your holy angels have charge of us, that the wicked one have no power over us.

#### *Midday or Mealtime*

Heavenly Father, in whom we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

#### *Evening*

We give thanks to you, heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ your dear Son, that you have this day so graciously protected us. We beg you to forgive us all our sins and the wrong which we have done. By your great mercy, defend us from all the perils and dangers of this night. Into your hands we commend our bodies and souls and all that is ours. Let your holy angels have charge of us, that the wicked one have no power over us.

Lord’s Prayer.

Into our lives and into our world, O God,  
**Stir up your power and come!**

## DAILY REFLECTIONS

*For well over 1500 years the church has celebrated Advent in its three meanings – it has watched for the return of Christ to usher in the kingdom; it has identified with Israel’s hope for the Messiah, and celebrated that hope fulfilled in the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem; and it has welcomed Christ’s presence in Word, Sacrament, and community. It has celebrated each of these Advents – past, present, and future – in song. Each day’s meditation in this booklet is a reflection on a stanza from an Advent hymn. The reading from Scripture for each day is also connected to that stanza.*

Sun., Nov. 27, 2011    1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent    Mark 13:24-26

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*Oh, my Lord, what a morning,  
when the stars begin to fall.  
You will hear the Christian shout,  
to wake the nations underground,  
looking to my God’s right hand,  
when the stars begin to fall.*

“My Lord, What a Morning” is an African-American Spiritual, an expression of the faith during the evil days of slavery and oppression. This stanza seems to refer to the last days, when Christ will come in all His glory, bringing hope for liberation.

How appropriate to meditate on this as we anticipate the celebration of the birth of Jesus. In order to grasp the reality of God’s kingdom, and that which will come, we can look at the life of Jesus and see how He lived among us and shapes our life today. God desires all of humankind to live in peace and harmony with one another. This is why God sent Jesus incarnate and this is God’s desire in the last days.

Mon., Nov. 28, 2011    Mark 13:33-37

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*Wake, awake, for night is flying,  
the watchmen on the heights are crying,  
Awake, Jerusalem, at last!  
Midnight hears the welcome voices  
and at the thrilling cry rejoices;  
come forth, O virgins, night is past!*

*The Bridegroom comes, awake,  
your lamps with gladness take; Alleluia!  
And for his marriage feast prepare,  
for you must go to meet him there.*

This hymn provides a glimpse into the waiting, watching and preparation that takes place during Advent. In this fast-paced society, we are often too busy to wait, watch and prepare for anything. Unfortunately, we end up missing a lot in life because of this!

During this season of Advent, may we not be too busy to prepare our spiritual lives for the celebration of Jesus’ birth. Let us take time to wait, watch and prepare as we pray, worship and lift our praises to God.

Tues., Nov. 29, 2011    Psalm 80:17-19

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*Zion hears the watchmen singing,  
and all her heart with joy is springing,  
she wakes, she rises from her gloom;  
for her Lord comes down all-glorious,  
the strong in grace, in truth victorious,  
her Star is risen, her Light is come.  
Ah come, O blessed One,  
God’s own beloved Son, Alleluia!  
We follow till the halls we see,  
where thou hast bid us sup with thee.*

It’s hard for us to get excited about anything these days. Nothing happens anywhere in the world that we don’t know about within moments. So let me ask you a question: How do we get excited about the song of the watchmen? We have no watchmen or town criers these days, and church bells don’t ring out when good news comes to town. We don’t need these quaint holdovers from another era; we have instant communication, so nothing escapes our notice—at least when we’re paying attention. But technology doesn’t save us – the message is done. Maybe if Tweets could sing or Blackberries could peal we’d pay more attention. In the meantime, we need singing watchmen perched on Zion’s hill, with their eyes scanning the horizon searching for signs of the King’s coming. Because he IS coming. That is the Advent promise.

Wed., Nov. 30, 2011

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

*Now let all the heavens adore thee,  
and men and angels sing before thee,  
with harp and cymbal's clearest tone;  
of one pearl each shining portal,  
where we are with the choir immortal  
of angels round thy dazzling throne;  
nor eye hath seen, nor ear hath yet attained to hear  
what there is ours;  
but we rejoice, and sing to thee  
our hymn of joy eternally.*

What does glory look like? Isaiah knew it when he saw it in the temple; but us? not so much! We are more comfortable with razzle-dazzle or glam-and-glitz. Glory is something else entirely. And yet, glory is that which we long for the most: that full chorus of angels and human beings singing full out and full throated. I try to imagine how it might sound, but I can only suppose, because my ears can't hear it. I can close my eyes to visualize the sight, but I see only darkness when I do that. To glimpse glory, and to hear the celestial hymn; ell the truth: what would we give to see and hear that in high-def and Dolby surround? To see it and hear it in person, that is more than we dare to hope. So God does it for us during these Advent days. Divine glory and heavenly music are on the way. Close your eyes and be quiet. See it and hear it. For real!

Thurs., Dec. 1, 2011

Luke 21:25-28

*The King shall come when morning dawns  
and light triumphant breaks,  
when beauty gilds the eastern hills  
and life to joy awakes.*

There is a wonderful urgency and hopefulness in these words. The language is bold and straightforward. The images are sharply drawn and easily recognized. There is certainty and assurance in this text: it speaks the language of faith. It doesn't look for signs and portents in the heavens. It does not try to read the mind of God, nor does it presume to declare the divine intention. It brings us a message for now, it conveys today. Hope is here; love is on

the way. The night may be prolonged at this time of the year, but that is no reason to give up on the coming dawn. So let spirits be joyful. Don't stop looking, and don't stop believing. The King SHALL come. People, look east!!

Fri., Dec. 2, 2011

Malachi 3:1-4

*Not as of old a little child,  
to bear and fight and die,  
but crowned with glory like the sun  
that lights the morning sky.*

The same, but different. That's really the message of this text. God will act as God always has, but don't count on the same old-same old. God means business; and God's business, as it has always been, is nothing less than the world's redemption. The joy of this text speaks of a new coming, fully in keeping with God's purpose. This is a new Advent, as old as time, yet as fresh as the coming dawn. This is a new plan, as ancient as the Covenant, but revised and re-written, blazing across the sky. This message comes to us brought by none other than the King himself. In spite of itself, the world will not be denied the will of God. God's will WILL be done—that is the Advent promise, and behold, he comes, he comes. Marana tha – even so, Lord Jesus, quickly come!

Sat., Dec. 3, 2011

Revelation 22:20-21

*The King shall come when morning dawns  
and light and beauty brings.  
Hail, Christ the Lord! Your people pray:  
come quickly, King of kings.*

Today's stanza ends with an urgent prayer: "Come quickly, King of kings." The season of Advent reminds us of the coming of the Savior into our world two thousand years ago. At the same time, it reminds us of the coming of Christ at the end of time. When that happens, evil will be gone forever. There will be no more hunger or thirst or suffering or tears and death will be swallowed up in victory. Best of all, we shall be in the presence of our most glorious Lord and abiding in his love forever and ever. Imagine that day! Pray fervently for it! "Come quickly, King of kings."

Sun., Dec. 4, 2011      2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent      Isaiah 40:1-2

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*“Comfort, comfort now my people;  
tell of peace!” So says our God.  
Comfort those who sit in darkness  
mourning under sorrow’s load.  
To God’s people now proclaim  
that God’s pardon waits for them!  
Tell them that their war is over;  
God will reign in peace forever.*

The Advent message is good news, bringing with it the promise of God’s forgiveness. But will we let it bring comfort to us? A woman once boarded a train where all the seats were full and only standing room was left. She stood in the aisle holding a heavy suitcase. The conductor, seeing this as he passed by, gently told her that she could put her burden down, assuring her that the train was able to carry both her and it. Like that woman we sometimes hold on to the guilt of our sins and allow ourselves to be weighed down by it. There is no need for that. God’s pardon waits for us!

Mon., Dec. 5, 2011      Mark 1:2-5

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*For the herald’s voice is crying  
in the desert far and near,  
calling us to true repentance,  
since the reign of God is here.  
Oh, that warning cry obey!  
Now prepare for God a way.  
Valleys, rise to greet the Savior;  
hills, bow down in humble favor.*

Many generations after Isaiah lived, the another prophet walked in the desert, fulfilling his words by declaring the coming of the Messiah. John the Baptist – the “herald” in our stanza – challenged his listeners to repent. As we begin our countdown to the celebration of God’s great gift to us through his Son at Christmastime, let us make sure that our preparation includes repentance. Let us straighten the rough edges within us, soften our hearts, change the attitudes and actions in our lives that aren’t in line with God’s best for us, and live each day ready to welcome the Messiah into every part of our lives.

Tues., Dec. 6, 2011      Isaiah 40:3-5

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*Straight shall be what long was crooked,  
and the rougher places plain.  
Let your hearts be true and humble,  
as befits God’s holy reign.  
For the glory of the Lord  
now on earth is shed abroad,  
and all flesh shall see the token  
that God’s word is never broken.*

Today’s stanza reminds us of the words of John the Baptist to his followers: “I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord.” John’s message then was one of repentance. Today the message from this hymn is similar but suggests a different tone: Let your hearts be true and humble. Do we experience the truth in our hearts? Are our hearts humble so as to allow God to soften what is reflected from our hearts? God breathes the Word that can never be silenced. Let us take a moment to quiet our minds and reflect on our hearts. Do I experience the Word in my heart? “For the glory of the Lord now on earth is shed abroad.” May our experience of God’s Word be reflected this day to all those around us. Thanks be to God!

Wed., Dec. 7, 2011      Jeremiah 33:14-16

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*Hark, the glad sound! The Savior comes,  
the Savior promised long;  
let every heart prepare a throne  
and every voice a song.*

When my boys were young, whenever I said something good was going to happen, they would try to make me promise that this would happen, no matter what. But that’s a precarious thing for a parent to do. If that thing doesn’t happen then the promise is empty and empty promises can lead to mistrust. The words in this stanza today tell us what the advent waiting season is all about. We are promised a Savior; we have waited for this Savior for a long time. How do we receive this promise? We know in our heart God’s promises are trustworthy. At last salvation is at hand! Sound the trumpets and praise and glory be to God!

Thurs., Dec. 8, 2011

Isaiah 61:1

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*He comes the prisoners to release,  
in Satan's bondage held.  
The gates of brass before him burst,  
the iron fetters yield.*

As we move through this Advent season we prepare our hearts and minds to receive the promised Savior. We might look at how our hearts and minds are held in bondage. What keeps us from freedom? What gods do we worship that keep us from experiencing life to its fullest? I have a friend who was recently released from prison. Though she is free now, she says she continues to feel the limitations of that prison cell. Her first days of freedom, she kept to her small room as she had been used to limited space and even more limited choices. She tells me that each day gets easier because she walks towards Jesus and all that His name promises: freedom to live, and to love and to be loved as a child of God. For humankind, the prison gates are open. The path is well lit and the chains are unfettered. Thanks be to God!

Fri., Dec. 9, 2011

Isaiah 42:1-3

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*He comes the broken heart to bind,  
the bleeding soul to cure,  
and with the treasures of his grace  
to enrich the humble poor.*

This hymn verse has richly descriptive phrases for us to explore. What might cause the soul to bleed? What treasures does Christ's grace bear? Isaiah, on whose words this stanza is based, describes a gentle, quiet grace, a faithful servant who will forever bring newness and healing for whatever our soul needs. Souls may fester with loneliness; souls may bleed from jealousies, anger, or bitterness. The acts of watching and waiting this Advent season give us time to reflect on our own humble poverty and how our emotional, and spiritual wounds may be bleeding. Eventually, we are no longer able to bind our own wounds. A Savior is promised who will bind up our bleeding wounds with love, forgiveness and the promise of a new life, here in this world and in the world to come. Praise be to God!

Sat., Dec. 10, 2011

Psalm 146:5-10

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*Our glad hosannas, Prince of peace,  
your welcome shall proclaim,  
and heaven's eternal arches  
ring with your beloved name.*

Doorbells announce the arrival of guests and friends to share the blessing of time together. The banging of steam pipes and the roar of a wood fire draw us into the comfort of their warmth. The whirl of beaters and the click clack of spoons fill us with a yearning for the treats to come. In this Advent season, instruments and voices join to tell our weary world of a peace brought by the Lord who "keeps faith forever." (Ps. 146:6) The faithfulness of our Lord serves as the bass line to the melody and harmony of our lives. In ways large and small we join in the glad hosannas: a gift of time with another; an offering of forgiveness; a gracious sharing of what we have in abundance with one who has need; the speaking for those cannot; listening with a faith-filled heart.

Sun., Dec. 11, 2011 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent

Matthew 3:1-6

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*On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry  
announces that the Lord is nigh;  
awake and hearken, for he brings  
glad tidings of the King of kings!*

Standing on the bank of a river, watching the powerful water sweep over rocks, branches and debris, is humbling and can bring me to my knees. Since I live near the Susquehanna River, I've had to learn to watch and listen for changes; they happen with great speed. Smoothing rough places, dipping into deep darkness and depositing fertile soil, the power of the river water shapes and reshapes all that it touches. By necessity, voices must be raised near the river in order to be heard. The Baptist's message is humbling, bringing me to my knees. The Lord of heaven is extending an open invitation: Come, set aside pride, lay down burdens, shake off fears, abandon hatred! Come, be transformed by forgiveness, encouraged by hope and strengthened by the nearness of the Lord! Listen for the changes in your life as the Lord is near to you! It is humbling and can bring you to your knees with joy.

Mon., Dec. 12, 2011

Matthew 3:7-10

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*Then cleansed be every life from sin,  
make straight the way for God within,  
and let us all our hearts prepare  
for Christ to come and enter there.*

“Make a list!” was the advice Alice gave her children when they struggled with how to proceed with any project from cleaning their room to planning a wedding. At the top of any “to do” list was a moment of prayer and thanksgiving. It was a simple thing for Alice. The prayer was a way to silence the noise of other demands, worries, needs and focus on the task at hand. The thanksgiving was recognition of the blessing of time, ability, help from family and friends and the grace of the Lord. Alice believed the Lord graciously provided all she needed to make life, well – LIFE! All that was necessary for life: family, home, work, friends, a faith community, food, laughter, tears. In this season of making lists of things we want, may the Baptist’s cry return us to the things that are necessary for LIFE!

Tues., Dec. 13, 2011

Isaiah 40:7-8

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*We hail you as our Savior, Lord,  
our refuge and our great reward;  
without your grace we waste away  
like flowers that wither and decay.*

This passage from Isaiah characterizes people as grass who fade and wither when God breathes upon them. It strikes me, a hospice chaplain, that at some point we all wither and decay, for that is the way of human life, and Isaiah’s point. Only Jesus, God’s Word, is constant and lives forever. So what about us? In our earthly lives, we run the risk of our spirits withering long before our bodies decay. The hymn-writer reminds us that the only way to truly thrive is to live in the refuge of God’s grace. Within the arms of Jesus is life worth living, and grace allows us to invite Jesus into our lives and hearts, not only in Advent, but in every moment.

Wed., Dec. 14, 2011

Luke 13:10-13

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*Stretch forth your hand, our health restore,  
and make us rise to fall no more;  
oh, let your face upon us shine  
and fill the world with love divine.*

This verse refers to Jesus healing, on the Sabbath, a woman who had not been able to stand upright for eighteen years. Jesus brought new life and health to one who was seeking him. At the same moment, he challenged the authority of the ones who would continue to bind her with their rigid rules. And yet, this woman was set free not so much *from* her bondage as *for* something: to immediately praise a God whose love for us in Jesus takes all “thou shalt nots” and transforms them with love into “thou mayst.” “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” in the light of God’s face shining upon us means that as we wait for the return of our Savior, we, too, will put love above all else, so that God’s world may be filled with love this Advent season.

Thurs., Dec. 15, 2011

Mark 11:8-10

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*Oh Lord, How shall I meet you, how welcome you aright?  
Your people long to greet you, my hope, my heart’s delight!  
Oh, kindle, Lord most holy, your lamp within my breast  
to do in spirit lowly all that may please you best.*

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is the messianic return of God to His people. The crowd chants “Hosanna in the highest” because in Jesus they see the political king who will finally free the nation of Israel. However, the freedom Christ would bring to them was no earthly freedom. He has no need to flaunt “earthly” authority. He rides on a donkey to show us that true power is gained by giving it up, true kingship by servant-hood, true love by sacrifice. Here he stands, a true King, the Divine King who comes to give himself for his people

Jesus stands at the gates of our heart waiting to be received and enthroned as our King. Will we allow Him to enter and be the King of us? Will we spread out the garments of our lives before Him and allow His kingdom of Love to rule within us?

Fri., Dec. 16, 2011

Isaiah 9:2

*Rejoice, then, you sad-hearted, who sit in deepest gloom,  
who mourn your joys departed and tremble at your doom.  
All hail the Lord's appearing! O glorious Sun, now come,  
send forth your beams so cheering and guide us safely home.*

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” This particular verse from the gospel of John illuminates the passage from Isaiah 9:2. The true light of the world has come and darkness has been dispelled. In Jesus the light of God shines on all existence. This light is eternal; it cannot be defeated. No matter what darkness may come against us, we have the hope and courage to stand because God, through Jesus, has conquered the evil and sickness of this world. Christ, “the Sun of Righteousness” has dawned through the darkness of death into the glorious light of the resurrection. There is no more darkness for those in the Light of Christ because in our pain we more deeply connect with His suffering. The more we give him our darkness, the more he illuminates us with his eternal Light.

Sat., Dec. 17, 2011

Proverbs 8:1-11

*O come, O Wisdom from on high,  
who orders all things mightily;  
to us the path of knowledge show,  
and teach us in her ways to go.*

Jesus is God's great “show and tell,” imparting wisdom through his actions and through his teachings. How does God want us to live? Jesus shows and tells us the way. “Love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself,” he teaches us and then proceeds to put that love into practice in his own life. He models for us how to grow in love and trust of God through prayer, obedience, and caring about and helping others.

May we commit our lives to God, praying for God's guidance and help to follow in the footsteps of our Savior, who is God's wisdom made flesh, full of grace and truth.

Sun., Dec. 18, 2011 4th Sunday of Advent

Exodus 6:2-7

*O come, O come, great Lord of might,  
who to thy tribes on Sinai's height  
in ancient times once gave the law,  
in cloud and majesty, and awe.*

“O that you would tear open the sky and come down!” cries the psalmist to God. “O that you would do something to help justice and peace flourish in our communities and throughout our nation and world!” we cry to God as we read or listen to the news. The Holy One who, “in ancient times once gave the law,” comes to us in the person of Jesus to lead us in the ways that make for peace and justice: caring for those in need; bringing healing and hope to those oppressed in body, mind, and spirit; welcoming and visiting with those who are outcast and the downcast; advocating for those who are most vulnerable. May we go and do likewise, to the glory of God and for the healing of the world.

Mon., Dec. 19, 2011

2 Samuel 7:4-5, 11b-12, 16

*O come, blest Branch of Jesse's tree,  
free those from Satan's tyranny  
who trust thy mighty power to save,  
and give them victory o'er the grave.*

When we see families, businesses, congregations, communities, Congress, denominations, and nations so riddled with conflict, greed, and fear, we may well wonder, “Where is the reign of Christ that promises victory over the tyranny of sin and death?” We pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done”; yet all too often we fail to treat others with the respect and compassion we want for ourselves. We pray, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us”; yet all too often we fail to let go of our grudges and resentments. We proclaim Jesus as our Lord; yet all too often we fail to obey Christ's rule of love when it comes to our attitudes, our decisions, our relationships, our use of money and time, our politics, our business practices, our meetings, and our treatment of neighbors near and far.

Tues., Dec. 20, 2011

Revelation 3:7-8

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*O come, O Key of David, come,  
and open wide our heavenly home;  
make safe the way that leads on high,  
and close the path to misery.*

As I read today's passages, I heard on the news that two Americans who had been prisoners in Iraq were released from captivity. A few days before, they had been sentenced to eight years' hard labor. The million dollars' bail was the "key" that opened the door to freedom! I'm sure they must be grateful and are thanking God; and I hope they will use the tremendous ordeal to build a life of usefulness and become faithful, faith-filled leaders.

Christ is the "key" who releases us from captivity to sin and death and opens the door to experience abundant life, joy, and peace in loving relationships with God and with others. Christ knows the character and problems of each individual and gives strength to those who struggle. Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, the door to eternal, abundant life is open! Thanks be to God!

Wed., Dec. 21, 2011

Revelation 22:16-17

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*O come, great Dayspring from on high,  
and cheer us by your drawing nigh;  
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
and death's dark shadow put to flight.*

In our waiting for Christ's second coming, we live in the midst of the darkness of this world with all of the problems that surround us – a stagnant economy, violence and military engagements that never seem to ease, family concerns for many of us and more. I need to know that something, someone will transform that darkness into light. I need to remember that our "Dayspring from on high" will come. As the days draw closer to the Nativity of our Lord, the lights have appeared on homes and businesses. Many of the people displaying the lights have no idea of the light of the world coming into the world but they do know that at this darkest time of the year we need to know that there is light ahead. We believers know that God will banish the darkness through the coming of the Lord and we rejoice in that hope and certainty.

Thurs., Dec. 22, 2011

Revelation 15:3-5

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*O come, Desire of nations, bind  
in one the hearts of humankind;  
and bid our sad divisions cease,  
and be yourself our King of Peace.*

As we work our way through the descriptions of the Coming One in the various stanzas of "O come, O come, Emmanuel," we arrive at the Desire of Nations – a call for peace for all people. Many have been praying and working for peace for all people all around the world for eons, and still we wait and pray and work for God's peace, for peace between and among the nations. Another title for Jesus is Prince of Peace, that reminder that God's will is for peace; yet we do not seem to know how to live in peace with each other or even ourselves. As the hymn notes we live with sad divisions – we remember the divisions between Protestants and Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland, we note our own sad history of the War between the States and current strife in the middle East between Israeli and Palestinian people. May we find ways to bind our hearts into one so the God's desire for peace among the people may find fulfillment.

Fri., Dec. 23, 2011

Matthew 1:18-22

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*O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
and ransom captive Israel,  
that mourns in lonely exile here  
until the Son of God appear.*

"You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Redeemed, ransomed, made free – all words that help us to know the liberation that is our gift from the Savior of the world. Jesus pays the ransom, the price for our sins and brings us out of exile into a promised land. We, as God's people, continue to wait for the fullness of God's revelation and to be returned from our exiles, our places away from knowing the presence of God. We pray continually for God, our Emmanuel, to come to us, to be with us, to make his presence known. Fulfill your purposes in us, dear Jesus.

Sat., Dec. 24, 2011

Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-7

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*Silent night, holy night!  
All is calm, all is bright  
round yon virgin mother and child.  
Holy Infant, so tender and mild,  
sleep in heavenly peace.*

When I served a combined Lutheran and United Church of Christ congregation many years ago, the union Christmas Eve service was the early service of the night. It was wonderfully loud with young children, many people from both congregations, lots of music and great festivity. Later on Christmas Eve, the Lutherans would have a communion service that was attended by a much smaller group; there was no choir, the large sanctuary was quiet and the mood was subdued. This became my favorite service of the season there – in the quietness our small group of pastor and worshipers celebrated the sacrament together and felt the silence and calm of this holy night. This service became a holy moment to me, bright with possibility, a calm time after the exuberance of the earlier service. The candlelight gave a softness to the night that allowed those of us who worshiped at this late hour a transition to then sleep ourselves in heavenly peace. It was a holy time for us all to reflect on the wonder of the Incarnation in our lives.

Sun., Dec. 25, 2011

Christmas Day

John 1:10-14

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*How silently, how silently  
the wondrous gift is given!  
So God imparts to human hearts  
the blessings of his heaven.  
No ear may hear his coming,  
but in this world of sin,  
where meek souls will receive him,  
still the dear Christ enters in.*

When some gifts are unwrapped this morning, they'll be greeted with polite gratitude: "Thanks so much!" Others, long awaited and dreamed of, will be greeted with whoops of joy and anticipation. But a few, chosen with painstaking care and love, showing that the giver knows the recipient deeply and well, will be greeted with absolute silence. With eyes full of tears, the recipients will look at the

givers, realizing that they are known and loved. The gift of Christ, celebrated on this day, is not only greeted with exuberance and raucous celebration, but also with silence, and awe, and tears.

Mon., Dec. 26, 2011

Stephen, Deacon & Martyr

Acts 6:2-6

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*In his master's steps he trod  
where the snow lay dinted;  
heat was in the very sod  
which the Saint had printed.  
Therefore, Christian souls, be sure,  
wealth or rank possessing,  
You who now will bless the poor  
Shall yourselves find blessing.*

King Wenceslas, the story goes, went out "on the Feast of Stephen," following the model of that saint in serving the poor and excluded – a ministry Stephen learned from Jesus himself. And in turn, the servant boy followed his king, who followed Stephen, who followed Christ. So we serve together, a great company walking in others footsteps, finding comfort in those who have gone before us, and finding blessing in serving others.

Tues., Dec. 27, 2011

John, Apostle

John 1:1-5

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*The highest, most holy, light of light eternal,  
born of a virgin, a mortal he comes;  
Son of the Father now in flesh appearing!  
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!*

John is called "the Divine," not because he was too cool for words, but because he is seen as a great theologian as well as a great storyteller. Great theologians are able to put the faith into words, so that we can hear about, learn from, and delight in each other's experiences. The prologue to the Gospel of John – of which we read the first few verses today – is a marvelous example of this ability. We read it and say, "That's what I believe!" "O Come, All Ye Faithful" is another marvelous example, using some of the same language. How often have we, unlike John, kept that faith to ourselves, and not spoken of its depth, its delights, and its life?

Wed., Dec. 28, 2011      Holy Innocents      Matthew 2:1-18

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*Herod the king, in his raging,  
charged he hath this day  
his men of might in his own sight  
all children young to slay.*

Why does Matthew include this terrible story in his gospel? Perhaps because faces of evil shone long before Herod and have continued long after Herod is dead. Moses saw evil in the face of Pharaoh when he led the Israelites out of Egypt and Jesus would see the faces of hatred when he looked down from his cross in the midst of great suffering. Through the centuries to the present, we have seen tyrants who try to assure their power with the blood of their subjects. Tyrants come and go, but the promised word of God's salvation for us in Christ cannot be defeated by the forces of evil, no matter when or where they appear or who they might be.

Thurs., Dec. 29, 2011      Luke 2:8-16

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*Hark! The herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the new-born king;  
peace on earth, and mercy mild,  
God and sinners reconciled."  
Joyful, all you nations, rise;  
join the triumph of the skies;  
with angelic hosts proclaim,  
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"*

We miss how remarkable thing it is that the herald angels sang to the shepherds. Shepherds were poor and near the bottom of the social pyramid. And yet, it's the shepherds to whom the angels announce the birth, and the shepherds who are told to go witness it. And they were received into the presence of Mary and Joseph and the baby when they went obediently as they had been told.

How could poor shepherds be expected to be given a welcome by the holy family, given their lowly status? Yet they were the ones to behold the Christ child face to face. What proved to be true for the shepherds would be borne out for others who would come to Christ. Jesus is one who does not turn himself away from anyone, regardless of wealth or poverty or any other condition that would

separate us from him. The shepherds received gracious hospitality upon their arrival at Bethlehem as did all who responded to Christ's offer of love, mercy and acceptance.

Fri., Dec. 30, 2011      Galatians 4:4-7

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*Christ, by highest heaven adored,  
Christ, the everlasting Lord,  
late in time behold him come,  
offspring of a virgin's womb.  
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see!  
Hail, incarnate deity!  
Pleased as man with us to dwell,  
Jesus, our Immanuel!"*

It is interesting that, in the midst of our Christmas celebrations with their happiness and "glad tidings," so many people experience depression and feelings of emptiness. Try as they might, many cannot envision choirs of joyous angels singing away in the skies above, or at least that this would bring good news to *them*.

St. Paul speaks of the incarnation of Christ in a very pointed way when in writing the churches of Galatia. Paul stresses that Jesus born as a human being – "offspring of a virgin's womb" – just like we are and that he lived under the same human conditions that we live under. He was subject to disappointment, sadness, pain, grief, suffering, temptation, loneliness, exclusion, joy, hope and everything else we experience, yet without sin. And of course, he was also subject to death, just as we are. Perhaps our deepest moments of Christmas joy come from awe at the lengths to which Christ was willing to go in his identification with us.

Sat., Dec. 31, 2011      Malachi 4:2

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*Hail, the heaven-born Prince of peace!  
Hail the Sun of righteousness!  
Light and life to all he brings,  
risen with healing in his wings.  
Mild, he lays his glory by,  
born that we no more must die,  
born to raise each child of earth,  
born to give us second birth.*



Wed., Jan. 4, 2012

Luke 24:25-27

*This is he whom seers in old time  
chanted of with one accord,  
whom the voices of the prophets  
promised in their faithful word;  
now he shines, the long-expected;  
let creation praise its Lord  
evermore and evermore.*

“Long-expected!” Have you ever taken a l-o-n-g trip to the grandparents’ house with a car load of children? You are glad when you get packed and begin the journey. But you are really happy when you arrive at the destination after suffering through the trip!

We too should rejoice that Christmas is over after all of that joyful celebration – the preparation, the planning and the journey. Take a deep breath and enjoy the sights, sounds and awesome wonder of the long-expected fulfillment of the prophets.

Thurs., Jan. 5, 2012 Epiphany of our Lord Philippians 2:9-11

*Let the heights of heaven adore him;  
angel hosts his praises sing;  
powers, dominions bow before him  
and extol our God and King;  
let no tongue on earth be silent,  
every voice in concert sing  
evermore and evermore.*

When one sings of the heights of heaven, one has usually experienced the depths of hell. Jesus came down from the Godhead in order to take on our human nature so that we may not have to experience hell without him. In fact, he put aside all personal rights and interests by humbling himself and becoming perfectly obedient in order to insure the welfare of others. Lower than the cross Christ could not go—he could not have been more disgraced or degraded, or seemed more separated from God. He stooped the lowest that anyone could stoop, and was raised the highest that anyone could ever be raised. And because of this graciousness of Christ, the gift of being raised to newness of life with Him is ours for evermore and evermore.

Fri., Jan. 6, 2012

Epiphany

Matthew 2:1, 9-11

*Guided by the star, they found  
him whose praise the ages sound.  
We too have a star to guide us,  
which forever will provide us  
with the light to find our Lord.*

What happened to the gifts presented to Jesus by the wise men? Scripture doesn’t say. Clearly they reflected the sages’ worship of the Christ-child at his birth. Yet we can speculate that they may have provided the means for his family’s flight to Egypt. The angel’s warning and instructions to Joseph to “Arise, take the young child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word,” were sudden and unexpected. There was no time to save enough money for such a long journey – if saving were even an option for this family. God promises to provide what is necessary for God’s children and to care for our needs. In this instance, offerings of worship may have paid for a journey to Egypt and a new life in a strange land. What does your worship provide?

Sat., Jan. 7, 2012

Psalm 72:10-15

*Songs of thankfulness and praise,  
Jesus, Lord to thee we raise,  
manifested by the star  
to the sages from afar,  
branch of royal David’s stem  
in thy birth at Bethlehem;  
anthems be to thee addressed,  
God in flesh made manifest.*

The composer of Psalm 72 recognized that if Israel’s king served the Lord and ruled with integrity, other rulers would be attracted to the God of Israel. And that is exactly what happened in the reign of Solomon. The Queen of Sheba journeyed to Jerusalem not merely to see Solomon’s impressive buildings or to negotiate strategic trade agreements, but to learn more about Solomon’s God. And so, centuries later, the first to worship Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel come from outside Israel. Perhaps the ones you least expect to respond to the Word of God will be the very ones to greet it with joy and wonder!

*Manifest at Jordan's stream,  
prophet, priest, and king supreme;  
and at Cana wedding guest,  
in thy Godhead manifest;  
manifest in power divine,  
changing water into wine;  
anthems be to thee addressed,  
God in flesh made manifest.*

There has long been controversy as to why Jesus was baptized if he indeed was without sin – what did he have to repent of? Some believe that Jesus' baptism signifies the beginning of his public ministry; other believe Jesus was baptized so he could enter into the Melchizedek priesthood in order to be the High Priest and offer himself as a sacrifice for our sins; and still others believe that Jesus' baptism allowed him to identify with all of humankind. Whatever the reason, Jesus as God made flesh understands real life. He faced real temptations that show up everyday in the “real” world. Jesus knows what we experience everyday – not from observing us from far off, but by living the life that every human lives. And so we who are baptized into his death are also baptized into his resurrection. Thanks be to God!

11/27	African American Spiritual
11/28 – 30	Philipp Nicolai, trans. Catherine Winkworth
12/1 – 3	John Brownlie
12/4 – 6	Johann Olearius, trans. Catherine Winkworth
12/7-10	Philip Dodridge
12/11 – 14	Charles Coffin
12/15 – 16	Paul Gerhardt, trans. Composite
12/17-23	Latin, 12 <sup>th</sup> Century, trans. John Mason Neale
12/24	Joseph Mohr, trans. John Young
12/25	Phillips Brooks
12/26	John Mason Neale
12/27	Latin, 18 <sup>th</sup> Century, trans/ Frederick Oakley
12/28	Pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors, Coventry England
12/29-31	Charles Wesley
1/1	African-American Spiritual
1/2 - 5	Fortunatus, trans. John Mason Neale
1/6	Nikolai Grundtvig, trans. Jens Christian Aaberg
1/7 – 8	Christopher Wadsworth

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