

It is no accident or coincidence that the song of Simeon and the declaration of the heavenly host in verse 14 are regular parts of our historical worship service. These are beautiful Words that God has given us which encapsulate tremendous events and ideas. God had become a real man, and He was fulfilling the divine promises that He would save us from sin, death, and the Enemy.

Every time we celebrate the Divine Service according to our received faithful custom of worship we remember Christmas, and His death on Good Friday, and Easter, and Judgment Day. True worship is focused on the things that God does, and these are the moments in our history where He works great blessings for us! That is why worship is properly focused on His Word and His Sacraments, and not on our efforts, feelings, or desires to be entertained. His work is far greater than those things.

One of the blessings that God works through His Word and Sacraments is that He teaches us to focus our thoughts, hopes, and lives on His work. He teaches us to wait on the Lord and to seek His kingdom and righteousness. He teaches us to be like Simeon, looking toward the Christ and rejoicing when He comes to be with us and grant us His peace and goodwill in forgiveness and salvation. Thanks be to God for that.

We pray: Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that the new birth of Thine only-begotten Son in the flesh may set us free, who are held in the old bondage under the yoke of sin; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

# THE LUTHERAN HERALD



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### *The Calendar*

December 3	Advent 1
December 10	Advent 2
December 13 (W)	St. Lucy, Martyr
December 17	Advent 3
December 21 (Th)	St. Thomas, Apostle
December 24	Advent 4
December 25 (M)	The Feast of the Nativity of our Lord
December 26 (Tu)	Festival of St. Stephen, Martyr
December 27 (W)	Festival of St. John, Apostle, Evangelist
December 28 (Th)	Festival of Holy Innocents
December 31	Sunday after Christmas

**FRIDAY, DECEMBER 29: LUKE 2:22-24**

**CHRISTMAS**

Every aspect of Jesus' life was in fulfillment of God's Word. From the lineage of His parents to the place of His birth, and all that was done to Him even as a young child, these things happened to satisfy all the righteous instructions of the Lord.

It was no accident that the Savior had been entrusted to Joseph and Mary. By God's wise providence He worked through the faithfulness of these people so that the infant Jesus would be raised according to His Word. It is similar to the way that the Lord works through faithful Christian parents to bring their young children into the life of the Church through the Sacrament of Baptism. Faithful or unfaithful, all parents have the responsibility to provide for the needs of their children, so faithful parents care for the very real spiritual needs of their little ones by bringing them to the Lord so that He may clothe them in Christ's righteousness and feed them with His Word.

God has blessed all peoples and nations through the ages with His promises and commands. These holy Words and ordinances were passed on from parents to children for the purpose of recognizing and remembering His ultimate grace in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins!

We pray: Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that the new birth of Thine only-begotten Son in the flesh may set us free, who are held in the old bondage under the yoke of sin; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

The shepherds had received a revelation from the Lord. His holy messengers, the angels, declared the birth of the Christ in that area, and in turn the shepherds were also made His holy messengers as they told others this marvelous news!

The message of the Christ was for all people, but the Lord chose to transmit it in this way, from angels to shepherds and from Mary to Luke. God continues to spread the Word of His Gospel among all people by means of people. Pastors teach the Word to the congregations, and all of us are to carry the Lord's Words with us in our daily lives and vocations. By our faithful words and works in all circumstances He can use these things to stir up faith in others with His Holy Spirit.

At certain times and places the Lord used miracles and grand visions to give man His glorious message, but other times it is passed on by common words and deeds. We don't need to expect signs and wonders because even the humble witness of common things point back to the grand things. The more important reality is that His Word comes to us! So let us rejoice that Christ our Lord does come to us in His Word, in His miraculous Sacraments, and in the work He does through His people in all their lives and vocations.

We pray: Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that the new birth of Thine only-begotten Son in the flesh may set us free, who are held in the old bondage under the yoke of sin; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

## Lesson from the Book of Concord First Sunday in Advent

### Article VI.

Also they [the Lutheran theologians] teach, that this Faith is bound to bring forth Good Fruits, and that it is necessary to do good works commanded by God, because of God's will, but not that we should rely on those works to merit justification before God. For remission of sins and justification are apprehended by faith, as also the voice of Christ attests: "When ye shall have done all these things, say: We are unprofitable servants" [Luke 17:10]. The same is also taught by the Fathers. For Ambrose says: "It is ordained of God that he who believes in Christ, is saved; freely receiving remission of sins, without works, by faith alone."

—The Augsburg Confession

### Part III, Article IV. Of the Gospel

We will now return to the Gospel, which not merely in one way gives us counsel and aid against sin; for God is superabundantly rich in His grace. First, through the spoken Word by which the forgiveness of sins is preached in the whole world; which is the peculiar office of the Gospel. Secondly, through baptism. Thirdly, through the holy sacrament of the altar. Fourthly, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren, Matt. 18:20: "Where two or three are gathered together," etc.

—The Smalcald Articles

*The selections from the Book of Concord are from H. E. Jacobs' translation of the Book of Concord, and are taken from the table in volume two of suggested lessons for Sundays and Festivals of the Church.*

As we enter the season of Advent Matthew directs us to recall how God reveals Himself in the person of Jesus Christ so He might move us to trust Him and declare “Lord have mercy!”

What keeps a person from receiving the good news that God has atoned for the sins of the world? Or how God wishes all men to come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved? Or how the one true God reveals Himself through Jesus Christ, promising rest to those who are heavy laden? It is the same answer as it has always been: the rejection of God means the rejection of Jesus Christ, His teaching, His person, and His grace.

Without faith there is no reason to cry out “Lord have mercy,” for there is no repentance. Without faith there is no ability to come to the One who gives rest for the soul. Without faith there is no ability to see that the yoke of the Lord is easy and His burden is light. But with faith we acknowledge our sin, we believe Jesus entered Jerusalem to sacrifice His life for sin, once and for all. That gracious action enables a person through faith to declare “Lord have mercy!” This Advent thank God for His free gift of faith!

We pray: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

John’s words remind us that Christmas is not just about happy feelings and generic good will among mankind. Christmas is about seeing God according to the Gospel of His Son Jesus Christ.

The fallen world continues to fight towards secularizing Christmas. The devil has taught people to see it as a time for sharing and kindness that is disconnected from the Scriptures. But such an empty message is not much better than sending holiday cards that tell people “Go to hell.”

Satan twisted God’s first teachings with Adam and Eve, and it brought sin and death to everyone. A twisted message of joy and peace is much the same. The whole point of Christmas is to remember that God had promised to send a Son who would defeat Satan and save us from sin and death. The wonderful news of Christmas is that the promised Christ finally came, and in Him we will have true peace and joy, and truly see God through the good will He manifests toward us in Jesus Christ!

We pray: Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that the new birth of Thine only-begotten Son in the flesh may set us free, who are held in the old bondage under the yoke of sin; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Christmas is a time for celebrating the peace and joy that God brings to mankind in Jesus Christ, but the Son of God also brought division and suffering to some. As Simeon foretold, He would bring division among the Jews. The faithfulness or faithlessness of their hearts would be revealed as they were confronted with the reality of Jesus being the promised Savior of Israel. He would become “a sign which will be spoken against.” This was especially true as He was raised up on the cross. The unbelievers mocked Him and showed their contempt for God’s revelation, while others would recognize that this man truly was the Son of God. The sign of the cross continues to have the same effect on people to this day.

The peace and joy of Christmas changes the world, but not in the ways that some people expect. It is a small thing for people to be filled with sentiments of kindness and goodwill towards each other for a season. False peace can be used to disguise evil intentions for later attacks. And good will can be done in a spirit of pride and self-glorification. But faith in Christ Jesus is the work of God’s Holy Spirit. In Him we are assured of peace and joy that goes beyond the ups and downs of present things to the true life of the world to come!

We pray: Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that the new birth of Thine only-begotten Son in the flesh may set us free, who are held in the old bondage under the yoke of sin; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

From his fall into sin mankind has always needed to hear and believe the message of the coming Savior whose plan was to rescue man from his inherited sin through His priestly sacrifice of His own body. This is the message that God called the prophets like Samuel and others to announce, how “these days” culminated in the coming of God’s Servant, Jesus Christ, who promised that as many as believed in Him, they would be called the sons of God.

During this Advent season we prepare our hearts and minds as we humbly remember the first Advent (coming) of the Savior, when God fulfilled the words of the prophets as He revealed Himself in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger as the God-Man, so that He might give His life as a substitute and ransom for sin on Calvary. To those who through faith believe in this miracle He gives the right to be called Sons of God as He still turns man from his iniquities. He rules our hearts and minds as King, and He remembers our sin no more (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

We pray: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

St. Paul identifies who it is that Advent prepares us for. It is the One we know by faith, Jesus, Savior of mankind. It is Christ, the anointed One, who is head of the Church. As we confess, He is true God, begotten of the Father, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary. He has redeemed us from sin, death, and the devil, not with silver or gold, but with His holy, precious blood, His innocent suffering and death!

Apparently some in Colosse were not convinced that salvation was accomplished by Christ's blood. Paul warns the Church against any new philosophy of salvation contrary to what he revealed to them from God's Word.

This same warning applies to the Church today with any man-made philosophy. God calls us to live in repentance daily. We are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, trusting that "it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross." May you be strengthened to continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that leads to repentance.

We pray: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Our salvation is a real event. It is not a myth or a "nice story." It is just as real for you as the best and worst days of your life. That is the importance of the historical names, places, and events that are included in Luke's account of the Lord's nativity. These points remind us that our life and salvation in Jesus Christ is not just sentiments or spiritual abstractions; it is as real as time, space, flesh, and blood.

God's "peace on earth and good will toward men" is an important confession that our salvation is very much connected to our everyday lives. The Christian faith is about far more than believing the right things about Jesus and then waiting to die and go to heaven. We toil under the realities of sin now, but the Gospel also brings us peace now! God's good will is His blessings in the Church, where He gives us wisdom, hope, and joy through His Word and the Sacraments that remind us that He is with us in Jesus Christ and that our sins are forgiven.

We pray: Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that the new birth of Thine only-begotten Son in the flesh may set us free, who are held in the old bondage under the yoke of sin; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

“Then Mary said, ‘Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.’ And the angel departed from her.”

Six months after Gabriel promised Zacharias a baby the angel came to Mary and promised her a still greater baby. Like Zacharias, Mary had a question: “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” It sounds similar to Zacharias’ “How can I know this” question, but it is a little different, and that little difference is critical. Zacharias did not believe God’s Word from the angel. Mary didn’t question it; she questioned the mechanics. She believed, but she didn’t know how it would happen because she had never been with a man.

The angel gave her as clear an explanation as possible when it comes to the mechanics of a miracle. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you.” Mary believed that, and humbly submitted to it. What she did not understand she still trusted. God grant us also, even when we don’t understand His Word, to trust it, to submit to it, and to cling to it. For the Words of the Lord truly are “the words of eternal life.”

We pray: Lord Jesus Christ, thank You for Your Words. Grant me grace to believe them, and to trust, even where I do not understand. Amen.

How often have you heard someone say, “God spoke to me!” or “God told me...”? Sometimes people make such statements to gain credibility before others. But some actually believe God speaks to them individually for the sake of His Church.

Hebrews clears the air about what is good for God’s Church by saying that if there is any communication from God, it comes through God’s Son, Jesus Christ, who is the Word made flesh. This means no one can claim, “I think God is saying...” or “I feel that God is saying...” when it is contrary to what Jesus taught and commanded.

What is credible or valid for the Church is what God has revealed through His Son, Jesus Christ. The Old Testament prophets, the New Testament evangelists and the writers of the Epistles all testify of Christ Jesus, for all doctrine, reproof, correction, or for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

This Advent, may we rejoice and give thanks to God for revealing His Son, who is true God, revealed in His Word. This brings man’s greatest joy in trusting that his sins have truly been forgiven by the blood of Christ, rather than depending upon one’s personal ideas or feelings.

We pray: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” Hebrews likewise pleads, “we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away.” God wants none to lose their hope and confidence in His promises and redemption through Jesus Christ.

Faithful pastors must be about announcing the good news, how every transgression and disobedience has been forgiven through Christ crucified, rather than saying man has a duty to finish what Christ began through his own works or repentance. It is the kindness of God and power of His Holy Spirit that leads a man to repentance, to daily drown the old man and come forth and live anew.

God works through His Word and Sacraments to plant faith in man so he may believe and be saved! Continually hearing Christ’s Word, remembering His blessings poured out on us in Baptism, and receiving His Body and Blood to strengthen our faith is sufficient. We receive His reward of grace, earned by His death, so that we do not lose heart and drift away!

We pray: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

“But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time.”

The angel had brought Zacharias some great news. He and his wife Elizabeth, childless and advanced in years, would soon have a son. Back then people didn’t think of children as a burden. They thought of them as gifts of God, as a “heritage of the Lord,” because that’s exactly what the Bible calls them (Psalm 127:3). The prayers of Zacharias and Elizabeth were answered. A son would soon be theirs.

But Zacharias knows biology. “How shall I know this?” he asks, observing that both he and his wife are old. It was a faithless question. “I hear your words, O angel of the Lord, but I also know old folks don’t have babies.” The Word of God stood against Zacharias’ observations, and he doubted the Lord’s words.

Then the angel cursed him... or was it a gift? If your mouth can’t say something faithful, then it should say nothing at all. And so it was that he was struck mute until his child, John the Baptist, was born. God grant us to believe His Word, even against our experiences, or understanding, or feelings. The Word of God is always right. So may we ever believe, and so may we always speak.

We pray: Oh Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise. Grant me by Your grace to say faithful things, or else to say nothing at all. Most of all, grant me faithfully to trust Your promises, especially Your promise of salvation in Christ Jesus. Amen.



**THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21: JAMES 5:7-11 3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY IN ADVENT**

“My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience.”

Once again the Word of the Lord calls us to patience. He uses the example of the patience of a farmer. In particular, we are admonished not to grumble against one another. What a terrible sin gossip is, and how sadly common it is even among believers! Rather, we are faithfully to endure suffering with patience as we await the coming of the Lord and the ultimate revelation of the compassion and mercy of God.

He singles out the prophets as examples of suffering and patience. There are important reasons why we recognize festivals of noteworthy saints in the Church. We give thanks to God that He forgave their sins, we give thanks that He used them to accomplish good things in this world, and we ask God to help us follow their example. Here we are invited to follow their example of enduring suffering and remaining patient. God grant us this! He will have His use of our sufferings, and His everlasting compassions and mercies shall be ours at the last.

We pray: Oh Lord, we long to experience the fullness of Your mercies. Give us patience through the course of our lives in this broken world. Use also our sufferings, even as we trust in the sufferings of Christ to atone for our sins and give us everlasting life. Amen.

**SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9: EPH. 3:1-12 1<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY IN ADVENT**

One cannot help but notice the humility displayed by Paul as his role of bringing Christ to the Gentiles is unfolded. First, he was a prisoner of Christ, and then he was one who is less than the least of all called to announce the Gospel.

Think back to the power of God at work in Paul's life. It was revealed on a trip to Damascus where Paul (as Saul) witnessed the omnipotent power of God being displayed with Saul's blindness. Then a voice that only he could hear asked, “Why are you persecuting Me?” Then came the promise fulfilled on the “straight street” where the scales fell from Saul's eyes, enabling him to see the mysteries of God unfold before him so he could preach the message of Christ crucified.

You and I as Gentiles are able to see what is the fellowship of the mystery. God created all things through Jesus Christ and made a way possible for man to be called children of God. Through baptism we are regenerated in the Spirit of God, captivated to live by His grace. This Advent, give thanks to God who has changed the direction of your life from tearing down to building up through confidence and faith in Christ.

We pray: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

**MONDAY, DECEMBER 11: ACTS 17:16-34 2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY IN ADVENT**

God's providence—the way in which all creation is geared toward supporting human life—points to God's existence and His goodness. But the Athenians were groping around in the dark for God, as all non-Christians still do. There's a reason for that. In the beginning God walked with Adam and Eve. But when they rebelled against Him they plunged our race into darkness. We no longer walk with God by nature. We're alienated from Him, sinners who are hostile toward Him, blind to who He is, unwilling and unable to know or worship the true God. God's providence alone still leaves Him unknown.

All of God's providence to mankind has this purpose: that when He sends His Word, as He did through the Apostle Paul and as He still does through His ministers, men should hear God's call to repent, to turn from their idolatry, to turn from their sin, to turn from their ignorance and know the true God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; who created all things; who revealed Himself to Israel; who came in the flesh, lived under the law, died for our sins, was raised and exalted to the right hand of God, and will come to judge the earth.

The unknown God has revealed Himself in the Gospel of Christ, and to know Christ by faith is to have eternal life. "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3).

We pray: O Lord God, we give You thanks for all that You provide for us, but especially for graciously providing Your Gospel, that we may know You rightly, believe in You steadfastly, and confess You joyfully. Preserve us, O Lord, in the true knowledge of You in Jesus Christ! Amen.

**WEDNESDAY, DEC. 20: LUKE 12:35-59 3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY IN ADVENT**

"Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division."

The Prince of Peace tells us that He didn't come to bring peace on earth. That can seem perplexing, especially with the angels hailing His birth at the beginning of Luke with "peace on earth, goodwill toward men." But the peace He brings to the earth is the opportunity for peace with God through faith in Him. And if you are at peace with God, you will be in conflict with the devil, the world, even with your own sinful flesh. Beware of a false theology of glory, of a doctrine that tells you "if you get right with Jesus it will all be peaches and cream"!

Our Lord is clear that it shall not be so.

But we can also take some comfort in reading this the other way. As we experience a lack of peace with the unbelieving, or as we experience even the division from fellow Christians who discard some aspect or another of our Lord's teaching, take heart: this is but further indication that you are His, that though you are not at peace with the world, you truly are at peace with God, for Christ's death on the cross has purchased your peace with Him.

We pray: Oh God, amidst the chaos and division of life in this world, do ever and continually, through Your peace that passes understanding, guard my heart and mind in Christ Jesus. Amen.

**TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19: LUKE 21:5-24 3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY IN ADVENT**

“By your patience possess your souls.”

Jesus warns the disciples, and us: you will be betrayed and you will be hated. There is a cost to being a Christian. Sometimes we do not even know what it is costing us. You do not need to know; it matters little. What matters is eternal life, and in Christ Jesus you have it. Be patient.

The disciples would need that patience. In the chapters following Luke 21 Jesus is arrested and crucified. That had to try the patience of His disciples! Nevertheless, they, and we, are not to panic. It may look bad at the moment, but by patience possess your souls. You do not have to know what will come of everything. God does know, and you can trust Him. Be patient.

Sadly, you might think Jesus had said “By ecstatic experience possess your souls” if we looked at the behavior of some Christians. We live in an “instant gratification” society. Is it any wonder that some of that thinking sneaks into the church? But God grant us grace to resist that, and, in the face of any and all perplexities and hardships, to cling to the sure and certain promises of the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life of the world to come, through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

We pray: Lord Jesus Christ, grant me the patience that comes from trusting in You. Amen.

**TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12: 1 JOHN 4:9-16 2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY IN ADVENT**

Mankind has invented all sorts of mangled notions of love. But Christians have the perfect pattern of love set forth for us in God the Father’s sending of His Son to be the world’s Savior, to give His whole life as the atonement for our sins. The love of God is His sincere devotion to our human race, in spite of our rebellion against Him who is love, in spite of our transgressions against His love-centered commandments. God’s sincere devotion to sinners was put on display in the incarnation of His Son, in His obedience to the Law in our place, in His humility, in His Words, in His deeds, and especially in His willing sacrifice on the cross. And now, as God calls out to us in the Gospel, inviting us to repent of our lovelessness and come into His kingdom of grace, the Word of God’s sincere devotion to us in Christ is what draws us to Him in faith, by which we are grafted into the Son of God, grafted into His love.

Those who have been grafted into His love by faith are now directed outward, to show this same kind of love to one another. How can it be any other way? Faith and love always go together. Faith toward God brings sincere devotion to one another, a heart set on doing good to our fellow believers, praying for them, forgiving them as we have been forgiven, serving them as we have been served, loving them as we have been loved. May this kind of love characterize us in the world as we celebrate the advent of Him who loved us and gave Himself for us!

We pray: Come, Holy Spirit, renew our hearts and kindle in us the fire of Your love! Amen.

**WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 13: COL. 1:1-8 2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY IN ADVENT**

Faith and love always go together: faith in Christ and love for all the saints. One never exists without the other. Faith and love characterized the Colossian Christians. It's what they were known for throughout the world. It's the report that reached St. Paul, for which he gave thanks to God and for which he commended them.

Where did their faith and love come from? Both came from the Holy Spirit, who convinced them through the Gospel of the hope laid up for them, and for all the saints, in heaven. The Word of truth about Christ's love for us poor sinners and about the glorious heavenly riches He has prepared for those who love Him kindles both faith and love in our hearts.

But faith and love don't remain hidden in the heart. The faith of the heart is confessed joyfully with the mouth so that all may know that Christ has loved us, and that we acknowledge His love for us with thanksgiving. The love of the heart is both professed with the mouth and displayed in selfless service and acts of devotion to our brothers and sisters in Christ, both near and far.

May it be your goal to be known throughout the world, not for your own impressive deeds or talents, but for the faith and love that the Holy Spirit has worked in you through His Gospel and that He continues to feed and strengthen through the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

We pray: Father in heaven, we give thanks to You for working faith and love in the hearts of Your saints. Strengthen our faith and increase our love by the powerful working of Your Holy Spirit, that we may be known as Your children and become a blessing to the saints throughout the world. Amen.

**MONDAY, DECEMBER 18: HEB. 10:35-39 3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY IN ADVENT**

The Word of God reminds us: "Do not cast away your confidence . . . you have need of endurance." The letter to the Hebrews was likely written to people who were tempted in precisely that way, people who were tempted to quit enduring as their confidence was shaken. To pull them back from such a disastrous course the letter quite simply reminds them of who they are: "We are of those who . . . believe to the saving of the soul."

In our day the devil has twisted many a mind. He tempts them, often successfully, to "identify" as something they manifestly are not, as something God has not created them to be. That doesn't mean there is something wrong with having an identity, but we let God furnish our identity, rather than trying to figure it out for ourselves.

The identity we have in Christ is as "those who believe to the saving of the soul." God has worked that in us. The Holy Spirit has called us by the Gospel, enlightened us with His gifts, sanctified and kept us with Jesus Christ in the one true faith, "to the saving of the soul." This is who we really are in Christ. This is the identity God Himself has given us. God grant us grace this day to live like who we are, and to put away living like who we aren't anymore. To God be the glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We pray: Lord God, heavenly Father, by the power of Your Holy Spirit, You have made me a new creation in Christ Jesus. Help me this day to live up to who You say I am, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

# Lesson from the Book of Concord

## Third Sunday in Advent

### Article V.

That we may obtain this faith, the Office of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who worketh faith where and when it pleaseth God in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justified those who believe that they are received into favor for Christ's sake.

They condemn the Anabaptists and others, who think that the Holy Ghost cometh to men without the external Word, through their own preparations and works.

—The Augsburg Confession

### Article XVI.

#### Of Political Order.

The sixteenth article the adversaries receive without any exception, in which we have confessed that it is lawful for the Christian to bear civil office, sit in judgment, determine matters by the imperial laws, and other laws in present force, appoint just punishments, engage in just wars, act as a soldier, make legal contracts, hold property, take an oath when magistrates require it, contract marriage; finally, that legitimate civil ordinances are good creatures of God and divine ordinances, which a Christian can use with safety. The entire topic concerning the distinction between the kingdom of Christ and a political kingdom has been explained to advantage in the literature of our writers, that the kingdom of Christ is spiritual, to wit, that it is in the heart the knowledge of God, and fear and faith in God, beginning eternal righteousness and eternal life; meanwhile it permits us outwardly to use legitimate political ordinances of every nation in which we live, just as it permits us to use medicine or the art of building, or food, drink, air. Neither does the Gospel bring new laws concerning the civil state, but commands that we obey present laws, whether they have been framed by heathen or by others, and that in this obedience we should exercise love.

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, §53–55a

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14: PHI. 2:12-18 2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY IN ADVENT

It is the Holy Spirit who works faith and love in us. And after we have been brought to faith in Christ God calls on His children to cooperate intentionally with His Spirit that we may grow in love. He admonishes us to use the Means of Grace by which He works, to walk according to God's commandments, to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure."

The Lutheran Confessions highlight the comfort of this phrase. "To all godly Christians who feel and experience in their hearts a small spark or longing for divine grace and eternal salvation this precious passage is very comforting; for they know that God has kindled in their hearts this beginning of true godliness, and that He will further strengthen and help them in their great weakness to persevere in true faith unto the end" (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, article II).

In today's reading God commands us to do "all things without complaining and disputing." That runs contrary to our flesh, which wants to grumble as soon as it experiences the slightest opposition. But we have God's promise to work in us and to strengthen us, so that we may learn to walk with His Spirit and to rejoice in His love instead of complaining.

We pray: Grant to us, Lord, the Spirit to think and do always such things as are right, that we, who cannot do anything that is good without You, may by You be enabled to live according to Your will; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. Amen.

Faith and love are not perfected in this life. The goal is not reached here. As long as we carry around our sinful flesh our faith will be imperfect and our love for others will be tainted with the sinful devotion to self.

But, as Paul knew, that's no reason to give up! Martin Luther's words reflect the meaning of the apostle: "This life is not godliness, but growth in godliness; not health, but healing; not being, but becoming; not rest, but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way; the process is not yet finished, but it has begun; this is not the goal, but it is road; at present all does not gleam and glitter, but everything is being purified" (Luther's Works, vol. 32, pg. 24).

The goal toward which we are pressing will be worth all the sighing and struggling and wrestling. The goal is to live under Christ in His heavenly kingdom, to serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, to live forever in the perfect love of God and in the perfect love that every citizen of heaven will have and show toward one another, without the weight of sin to diminish it.

That goal was already purchased for us by our Lord Jesus. We press on, not to earn it, but to arrive at it. We run the race, not to win God's grace, but because God has made us His own through Holy Baptism and has set us on this path, to pursue faith and love with our whole being until He Himself perfects us in the life to come.

We pray: O God, mercifully grant us Your grace, that we, running the way of Your commandments, may be made partakers of Your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The themes of Advent—Christ's coming and our need to lead pious lives of daily repentance as we wait for Him—are set forth beautifully in today's reading.

Christ admonished us in Sunday's Gospel, "Take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly... Watch, therefore, and pray always" (Luke 21:34,36). St. Paul reissues this same warning as he writes to the Colossians. Instead of indulging in sinful, earthly pleasures, instead of focusing on temporal, earthly goals, remember your Baptism, where you were joined with Christ, buried with Him and also raised again to life, where you were made alive together with Him, where all your trespasses were forgiven you (cf. Colossians 2:12-13). Remember that your goal is living with Christ! If your life has been tied to Christ so intimately, if your goal is to live a life of sinlessness, then what place do fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness have in the new life Christ has given you? What place do anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, and filthy language have in the lives of those who are preparing for heaven, whose life is already hidden there in Christ?

Keep looking up. Watch. Pray for God's help to preserve you in watchfulness and in leading a life that is worthy of your calling. The God who created the new man in you, who has united you to Christ as your all in all, is faithfully devoted to preserving and strengthening you until the end.

We pray: Holy Father, bless us and keep us from all sin and shame. By the power of Your Holy Spirit, draw our eyes and our hearts heavenward, where our dear Lord Jesus sits at Your right hand. Amen.