

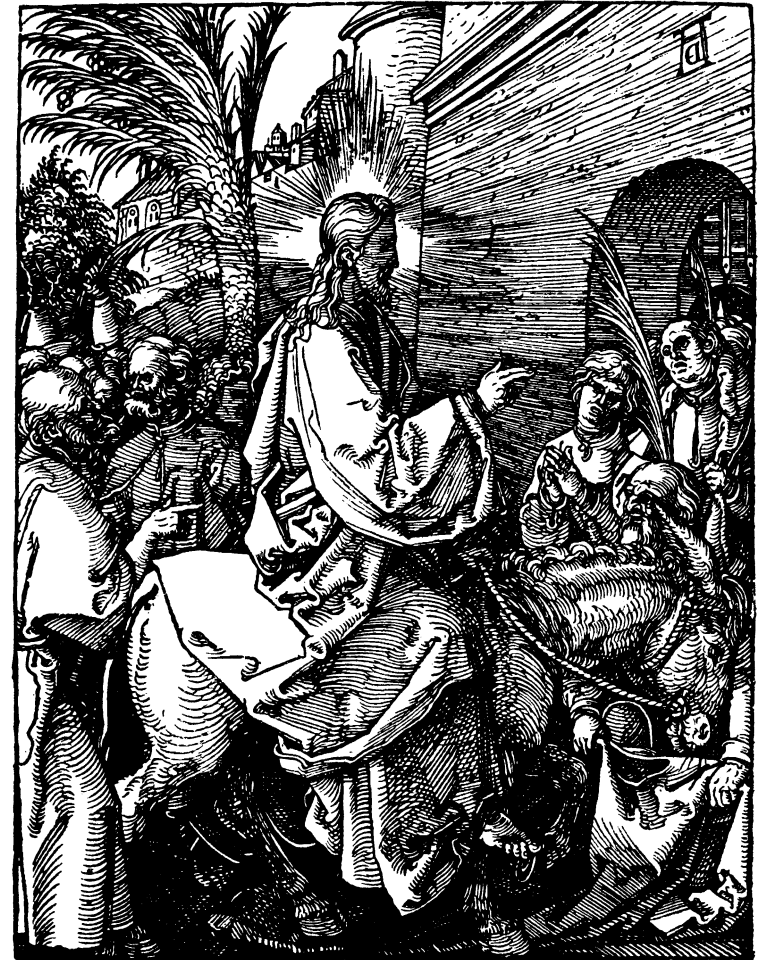
After Herod died, the holy family could finally depart from Egypt. But still, they had a long way to go. Even after Egypt, Jesus still wasn't safe. For upon returning to Israel, Joseph found out that Herod's son, Archelaus, had become ruler of Judea, the province that contained Bethlehem. Once again, an angel intervened and directed Joseph to Galilee, where the family settled in Nazareth.

Now, to be called a "Nazarene" wasn't a compliment. It was something you whispered under your breath. Nazareth was unknown and undistinguished. Many Roman soldiers lived there, and Nazarenes were looked down upon as being compromisers with the Gentiles and enemies of the Jews.

Nazareth isn't even mentioned in the Old Testament, and it hardly carries any distinction in the New. Remember when Philip found Nathanael and told him they'd found the Messiah in the person of Jesus of Nazareth? Nathanael replied, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

But Nazareth would be the ideal place for Jesus to "set up shop." The Despised One would fit right in with the despised town. He was called the "little branch" or "tender shoot." In Hebrew, *nazar*. Jesus, the little green shoot from the stump of Jesse, came from this little, frail, despised town named Nazareth. "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from His roots shall bear fruit" (Isaiah 11:1). And so, from the Old Testament root word *nazar*, we get the New Testament word "Nazareth." And from "Nazareth," we indeed get something "good."

# THE LUTHERAN HERALD



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**THE GOSPEL****ST. MATTHEW 21:1-8 (NKJV)**

Now when they drew near Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and immediately he will send them.” All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying:

“Tell the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your King is coming to you, Lowly, and sitting on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

So the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded them. They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their clothes on them, and set Him on them. And a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road; others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

**THE COLLECT**

Stir up, we beseech You, Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

King Herod tried to use the Wise Men to locate Jesus, that he might eliminate this threat to his throne. But when that plan failed, Herod flew into a tirade. By now Jesus was about a year old, so Herod ordered all male children in Bethlehem less than two years of age to be slaughtered (just to give himself some cushion). But Joseph was warned by an angel to flee that night and escape to Egypt.

Bethlehem was only a two-hour journey from Jerusalem, so it’s reasonable to assume the Magi arrived in Bethlehem on the same day they’d spoken with Herod. It’s also very possible they left Bethlehem that same night and headed back east, just as Joseph, Mary, and the Christ Child would be departing west for Egypt. By morning the Magi and the holy family were simply gone, heading in opposite directions. No one in Bethlehem could tell Herod where anyone was because no one knew. Everyone--the whole entourage, the whole Nativity set--was simply gone.

But there were still those who remained. “Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under...”

You might say the little ones died that day for no other reason than they “resembled Jesus” as baby boys 2-years-old and younger. We call these boys of Bethlehem the “holy innocents,” not because they were holy or innocent on their own, or by the way the tragic way they died, but because they were victims of a slaughter aimed not at them, but at Someone even more innocent: someone without sin, Christ, our Lord.

Circumcision identified the root cause of mankind's dilemma. It's not that we have certain sins we need to "prune off the tree." It's the tree itself--its root--its origin that is corrupt. And so, by commanding that 8-day-old boys be circumcised, God emphasized that His concern isn't just with sins we commit, but the inherent, sinful nature of our condition--which is present even before it manifests itself in outward acts. And so, circumcision points to the helplessness of the Old Adam: the plague of original sin.

But why Jesus? Why did He have to be circumcised? Surely He didn't need to be reminded of His sinful nature! Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, He had no sin, nor any sinful condition that needed to be marked. So why did God allow His infant Son to be carried off to the temple and be permanently labeled like all other Israelite males? It would be this: the rite of circumcision was to begin Jesus' work of identification and substitution.

Jesus not only identified Himself with Abraham and his descendants. He not only solidified His claim as a fully obedient man of Israel, but He became the replacement for all humanity. He put Himself in the place of all sinners everywhere to make atonement by the shedding of His blood. Only through such action can forgiveness be won. By His bleeding, Jesus declares you to be His own, giving you the right to be called a "son or daughter of God." By such blood He has brought you from the darkness of sin into the light of His own family.

In the first book of Kings in the first chapter is described the installation and the royal entry of Solomon. With him, at the royal decree of his father David, things were conducted in this way: He was set on the king's mule, He was anointed with sacred oil by the Priest Zadock, the prophet Nathan, and by Erethi and Plethi; that is, he was led away by the bodyguard of King David to Gihon, preceded by trumpet blasts and cheered by men...

In this story, Solomon is a prototype of the Lord Christ, the heavenly Solomon (Mat. 12:42), for the word "Solomon" means a peace-prince; now, however, Christ is the true Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6). Accordingly, as Solomon was anointed as king with the sacred oil, so Christ was anointed as our eternal King with the oil of joy, the Holy Spirit (Psa. 45:8). Just as Solomon also prepared himself at Gihon (which was a beautiful, bubbling spring at Jerusalem) for His royal entrance from there into the city, so also Christ, in order to fulfill this prototype and especially to fulfill the prophecy of Zec. 9:9, conducted His royal entry into Jerusalem. Solomon was set upon the king's mule, and at his coronation everything was carried out with pomp and glory, because his kingdom was an earthly, worldly kingdom. However, Christ wanted to carry out His royal entry upon a donkey, which does not have a special regard before the world, for His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). At the entry of Solomon, one heard fifes and trumpets, all the people rejoiced and shouted out to Him: "Success to King Solomon"; thus the evangelists announce that the Lord Christ was welcomed by the people at Jerusalem with great jubilation, and he was shouted at with [the words of] Psa. 118:26: "Hosanna to the Son of David, praise to Him who comes in the Name of the Lord."

(From the *Postilla (1613)* of Johann Gerhard, Sermon for Advent 1)

As the time for Christ's passion grew ever more closer, He also wanted to draw closer to the place of His suffering; accordingly, on Palm Sunday He left Bethany (where He shortly before had raised Lazarus) and went from there towards Jerusalem—which lay two miles from Bethany. However, as He on His final journey came to Bethphage ... Jesus did something unusual by not taking the usual route over the brook of Kidron that He normally took in going to the fortress of Zion; rather, He veered away from this route and went towards the door of the Temple. As He arrived at the mount of Olives, He had two of His disciples make preparations in the next location, instructing them that they were to lead back to Him a donkey along with its colt which they would find there, so that He might conduct His entry. ... Why such had to occur for the Lord Christ, the evangelist explains and additionally shows that He herewith wanted to fulfill what was previously proclaimed through the prophet Zechariah (9:9); namely, how the Messiah would conduct His entry into Jerusalem on an donkey, as He initiated His work of redemption, which would have to be fulfilled concerning the Messiah as well (as other prophecies). From this first part, we need to learn:

1. That Christ is our King; for inasmuch as Christ on this occasion conducts His entry, the evangelist interprets from the prophet Zechariah that Christ thereby wanted to indicate that He was a King and that this was to be regarded as a royal entry. If Christ is a King, then He will also have a kingdom, for what kind of king would one be without a kingdom?

Such a kingdom of the Lord Christ then consists in this: that He rules all things in heaven and upon earth with might and power; to Him is given all power in heaven and upon earth (Mat. 28:18). And this is His general kingdom of His divine omnipotence; but He especially rules His Christian Church, which is called the kingdom of His grace. This one He gathers to Himself through His Word; rules His believers by His Holy Spirit; protects them against all enemies; and finally leads them into His eternal kingdom of heaven, where He wants to live with them and walk with them, 2 Cor. 6:16, which is called the kingdom of His glory.

(From the *Postilla (1613)* of Johann Gerhard, Sermon for Advent 1)

As the holiday season comes to a close, there is understandable sadness. What we've spent months getting ready for is passed. The preparation and fulfillment have been replaced with the mundane sameness of everyday life. The glory seems to be gone.

One might wonder if Joseph and Mary felt some of those same things. After all, look at what they'd just gone through: the excitement of the Son of God being born-to them! There was the unexpected visit of the shepherds and the "glory of God" being revealed. And then came later the visit of the Magi, bearing gifts for the newborn King. But now what? Those things are done; they're in the past, just distant memories for Joseph and Mary. Now they must set about the task of raising a family, with the challenge of raising the Son of God.

But there was no time to rest. For you'll recall, when King Herod found out from the Wise Men that another King had been born, he was fearful for his throne. So he tried to use the Wise Men to find Jesus and have the infant King murdered. But Joseph was warned by an angel to flee that night and escape quickly to Egypt.

God called His Son out of Egypt to lead the whole world out of the greater Egypt that held the world in the slavery of sin. God has called you out of Egypt, too. By virtue of your Baptism, He's called you out of the midst of Egypt's bondage. And by virtue of His Word and Sacrament, He continues to lead you so you may enter the Promised Land of eternal life.

We read that Simeon was a “righteous” Israelite, meaning he was “judged righteous” or “justified” in the eyes of God. It also says that Simeon was “devout,” meaning that he truly lived out his faith in devotion to his Lord. So we see in these two descriptions the sum total of the Christian existence: justification (being judged righteous) and sanctification (the living out of our justified state).

But what’s more remarkable about Simeon is not who he is, but what’s done to and for Simeon. Three times in the first three verses of our text the Holy Spirit is the actor. The Holy Spirit made Simeon long for his salvation. The Holy Spirit made him devout, and revealed to him that he would get to see his salvation with his own earthly eyes. The Holy Spirit guided Simeon into the temple, giving him eyes of faith to recognize his salvation. And finally, it was the Holy Spirit who primed Simeon to prophesy with such foresight, clarity, and truth.

Then Simeon’s big day came, right there in the Jerusalem temple. His conception of salvation took on clarity and substance. He took the Child in his arms, and literally beheld his Savior. As he did so, Simeon made the profound confession and prophecy that described Who this child really is. One might wonder if Simeon was thinking, “I wonder Who is really holding whom?” For it was the Christ, Who would bring us to the Father.

As regards His kingdom of omnipotence throughout the whole world and the kingdom of His glory in eternal life, they will be considered elsewhere. Right now we want to consider only His kingdom of grace, through which He rules the Christian Church. But we will not consider all His gracious workings in this kingdom; namely, how He gives His Church apostles, evangelists, shepherds and teachers (Eph. 4:11), who are the so-called royal hosts of Psa. 68:13. Also, how He calls people to the fellowship of His kingdom through the Word and holy Sacraments; how He protects the citizens of this grace-kingdom against all their enemies, so that it is said of them: God will smash the heads of His enemies along with their hairy skulls, Psa. 68:21. About these works of Christ, which altogether belong to the kingdom of grace, we will not give consideration at this time; rather, only about how He rules in the hearts of the believers through His grace and Holy Spirit. St. Paul speaks of this in Eph. 3:17, that Christ lives in our hearts through faith.

Now this kingdom is so constituted that it does not come with external gestures, rather it is internally within us, as the Lord Christ Himself describes it in Luke 17:20–21. But how is it to be understood, that Christ kingdom does not come with outward gestures, but that it is internally within us? St. Paul explains it in Rom. 14:17: For the kingdom of God does not consist of eating and drinking, rather of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; that is, Christ’s kingdom is not bound to a certain place, food, clothing, and the like; rather, it is an inward spiritual kingdom which is to be found within the inward person where righteousness, peace and joy from the Holy Spirit are awakened. All earthly kings govern their kingdoms with outward trappings so that one sees the glory of their kingdom. However, Christ governs His grace-kingdom within the innermost foundation of the heart, so that it is stated: The king’s daughter is inwardly most glorious, she is clothed with golden pieces, Psa. 45:14. One cannot outwardly see the glorious smock and the decorations with which Christ has clothed the citizens of His kingdom; rather, they are internally hidden within them.

(From the *Postilla (1613)* of Johann Gerhard, Sermon for Advent 1)

Just as a king possesses the complete power to create and order everything in his kingdom ... so also where Christ reigns in the heart of a believing person, there He guides and leads him to all that is good, and (as St. Paul says in Gal. 2:20) He lives in him; that is, as the soul of a person gives motivation to a person's natural life, so the Lord Christ gives such a person spiritual life and the motivation of the Spirit, that such a person obediently and willingly, yes with eagerness, submits to the will of God. That's why Christ has taught us to pray in the Our Father: *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* If we have prayed that His kingdom come, in keeping with Christ's direction we immediately add to it that His will be done by us and be fulfilled through us; for if the spiritual grace-kingdom of God is to come to us, we must submit ourselves and give ourselves over to His will so that we, in all humble obedience, follow the reign of Christ by the Holy Spirit for the purpose (as St. Paul also wishes for the Ephesians) to become strong in the inward person (and quickly adds on) and for Christ to live in your hearts through faith—as if he wanted to say: If you are to increase in the inward person, then Christ has to live in your hearts by faith and rule within it (Eph. 3:17).

At the same time, it is to be noted that the inward grace-kingdom of Christ is not as complete as it will be someday in eternal life, for the sinful flesh still remains within us; it resists the Spirit and the reign of Christ (Gal. 5:17). Therefore it is required that the flesh be forced into submission to the obedience of Christ and be taken captive (2 Cor. 10:5). ... Also, we experience a weak result in our efforts to subjugate the flesh to the reign of Christ. Such is now also portrayed in this story; for what the Evangelists say about Christ being given a ride on a donkey and upon a colt is to be understood as a play on words; namely, that Christ carried out His entry upon the colt of the donkey, and the donkey was pulled after him—as is to be deduced from Zec. 9:9 and from the evangelist John in 12:14. By this it is portrayed that if Christ reigns over our inner man, the donkey (that is, our flesh, our old man, the lazy burden-bearing donkey) has to be pulled after Christ by force so that he follows the suffering Christ and the inner man. (From the *Postilla (1613)* of Johann Gerhard, Sermon for Advent 1)

This section of Luke is replete with Old Testament imagery. Prior to this in verse 21 we had the circumcision and naming of Jesus, and now His purification and presentation. All these events are consistent with the proper treatment of a firstborn son of a Jewish family. We see first of all, then, the devotion of Mary and Joseph in adhering to the law of Moses. In doing so Jesus gets a proper start in being obedient to the old covenant.

In today's reading we first read of the law of purification outlined in Leviticus 12, which commanded an offering of two turtledoves or two young pigeons; one for a sin offering and one for a burnt offering. Notable is the fact that Mary and Joseph were poor and couldn't afford the preferred lamb for the burnt offering. What is hidden in this, of course, is that Jesus is the preferred lamb.

In Exodus 13, we hear these words: "Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Consecrate to Me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is Mine.'" In Numbers 3 we read that the parents could redeem the child from lifetime service for a payment of five shekels. Note that Mary and Joseph make no such payment. As their child Jesus is presented, He's given over to the Lord's service in unprecedented fashion. As God, He'll serve on behalf of all people by virtue of His perfect life and sacrificial death. Behold, God's pure and perfect Lamb-presented to take away the sins of the world.

## GOSPEL

ST. LUKE 2:33-40 (NKJV)

And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

So when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.

## THE COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, direct our actions according to Your good pleasure, that in the name of Your beloved Son we may be made to abound in good works; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

2. Since Christ's kingdom is an inner, spiritual kingdom, it follows from this that it is not an earthly, worldly kingdom; that we also do not in this kingdom primarily hope for temporal goods and welfare from this King. ... Christ uses a donkey and her colt for His entry in order to portray that His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36); to show that He did not come to establish an earthly kingdom; rather, that He is being installed as the King over mount Zion, that is, the Christian Church (Psa. 2:6). To this also pertains that the Lord Christ in this His entrance did not wish to ride in through the castle door (the shortest route from the mount of Olives to the city); instead, He diligently endeavored to detour so that He would come through the temple gate, to indicate thereby that He is not coming to conquer the citadel of Zion and to establish the kind of outward, worldly kingdom like David and Solomon led; rather, for Him it had to do with the Temple (that is, with His Church and all the members of it), so that He might establish in their hearts His spiritual kingdom and distribute heavenly blessings [to them].

This fails to serve the purpose of the Jews, who at that time hoped for the kind of Messiah and King who would distribute temporal welfare and earthly goods to them, deliver them from the power of Rome and make them into a great nation. It also fails to serve the purpose of us, when such Jewish thoughts also arise in our hearts; for when we in sickness, deprivation, temptation, and similar crosses cry to our Lord and King for help, and He does not help us immediately but instead sometimes actually lets us be stuck under the burden of the affliction until we die, we begin to doubt whether we still are true members of the grace-kingdom of Christ. ... Against this we should note that the Lord Christ not only demonstrates in John 18:36 with words that His Kingdom is not of this world, but, He also demonstrates with action and deed by this His royal entry in which He utilizes no outward pomp, nor disburses any gold or silver, initiates no worldly kingdom; rather, He demonstrates by every action and undertaking that He is no worldly king nor leads a worldly kingdom.

(From the *Postilla (1613)* of Johann Gerhard, Sermon for Advent 1)

Finally, this King is also poor and gentle, through which a great treasure of this kingdom is also held out to us. With worldly kings, things transpire this way: in their poverty, they can help their subjects very little; but this heavenly King has won for us the heavenly, eternal blessings and benefits with His poverty; for even though He was rich, yet He became poor, so that He could make us rich (2 Cor. 8:9). That's why we obviously have reason to rejoice in the fact that He willingly gave Himself over into such poverty for our sake. The evangelist recorded the word gentle, for the Hebrew word used by the prophet indicates the kind of poor person whose heart is lowly and lamenting, a heart in which one sees sheer gentleness and compassion.

Christ then made proclamation about this in this story through His deed, for He sends Himself to the mount of Olives for His entry, to show that He is a meek and mild King, for in the Holy Scriptures [olive] oil signifies meekness and mildness. Also, He does not use any pompous prancing steed for His entry; rather, a donkey, which is a patient, burden-bearing animal. Yes, He also weeps with heartfeltness over the city of Jerusalem, as He descends from the mount of Olives in Luke 19:41, so that one indeed can see His sympathetic heart.

This is also a treasure in the kingdom of this King: that in Him we have a gentle, meek and mild King, Isa. 42:23: He will not scream nor cry out, and no one will hear His voice in the streets; the bruised reed He will not break and the glimmering wick He will not extinguish, etc. Even though we ambitiously apply ourselves from the heart to serve this King in His kingdom, yet sometimes much decrepitude [frailty] runs along side; there is then the comfort that we have such a King whose mercy bears with our weakness (Heb. 4:15) and does not quickly shove us away—instead, He daily improves us.

(From the *Postilla (1613)* of Johann Gerhard, Sermon for Advent 1)

The genealogy of Jesus Christ emphasizes two important points. The first is that God keeps His promises. And the second is that His work of our salvation is a true flesh and blood reality.

Our Lord does not make idle promises, nor does He forget about the promises He makes. Reflecting on Jesus' genealogy shows how God guided and protected His chosen people so that Satan would truly be crushed and defeated. His promise was made to Adam and Eve after they fell into sin. It was affirmed in Abraham, whose offspring would make a mighty kingdom and nation. It was further magnified in King David and the glory that God accomplished through him. All these things were part of God's gracious revelation that He would truly deliver His Son at the proper place and time to bring about the salvation of mankind!

Secondly, the work of our salvation from death and sin is not mere philosophy. It is not a matter of a fickle deity just changing his mind and saying, "It's ok, I changed my mind." The wages of our sin is death. And rather than be a liar and go against the order of things He established at creation, He paid the price of that death Himself. Real people committed real sins throughout history, and it required real blood and real death. Jesus Christ was true man with real a real lineage and real flesh and blood. So His death was real as well, which makes our salvation real!

We pray: Lord God, endless thanks and praise be to You on account of Your mercy shown to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Make us always to remember the reality of our Lord's life and death, which brings us true forgiveness. Amen.



John the Baptizer was a prophet of the Highest because God used him to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins. This is the greatest, most important message of the Christmas season! The joy, peace, and merriness are all by-products of the great gift that God gave us in His incarnate Son.

Apart from the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ and the repentant faith that the Holy Ghost creates in us, there is no cause for joy and merriness. God's good will toward men is found in the Gospel of our salvation in Christ, who would be crucified and risen again at Easter!

John's role as the last of the Old Testament prophets was important because God's people needed to be called to repentance. Israel needed to be told, reminded, and refocused on the fact that their glory was not in themselves, but in God, who was the one who lifted them up and saved them from the Enemy. The same is true for all mankind. Our glory is not in our own kindness, or our own generosity. It is in our identity as baptized and redeemed sinners who are alive in the Son of God.

We pray: Lord God, endless thanks and praise be to You on account of Your mercy shown to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Make us always to remember Your kind forgiveness, which is proclaimed to us in Your Word and given to us in Your Sacraments. By these, keep us faithful and steadfast in Your dear Son forever. Amen.

**THE GOSPEL**

**ST. LUKE 21:25-36 (NKJV)**

“And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of heaven will be shaken.

“Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

“Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near.”

Then He spoke to them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. When they are already budding, you see and know for yourselves that summer is now near. So you also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near.”

“Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.

“But 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. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

**THE COLLECT**

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Thine only-begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve Thee with pure minds; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth, and reigneth, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

The Athenians, like all people, knew by nature that God existed, and that they owed Him their worship and service. But they didn't know who God is or how He is to be served, so they invented worthless idols and sinfully worshiped the work of their own hands, for which they would surely be condemned. But then God gave them a precious gift: He put St. Paul in the right place, at the right time, to proclaim the true God to them, so that they might know Him, repent of their idolatry, believe and be saved before the great day of the Lord's judgment.

God's impending judgment on the world highlights the urgency for unbelievers to repent, because the very same Jesus who was born of Mary, crucified and raised from the dead, will soon come to judge the earth, and when He comes, all who are found outside of Him will face the severe judgment of God's holy Law. But those who are found in Christ will escape God's judgment, because the Holy Spirit, through the Means of Grace, has brought them into the Christian Church, "where there is nothing but pure forgiveness of sins." Now is the time to know and to worship the true God by hearing and believing His Word. Now is the time for the saints to walk in daily repentance and faith, that we may be prepared on the day when God will judge the world in righteousness.

Collect: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your Only-Begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the greatest thing of which any of us can speak. It is the most valuable gift that God has given mankind. We have been given the promise, the history, the fulfillment, and the on-going testament of the Lord's salvation for us in the flesh and blood of Christ Jesus crucified.

The Word of God's gracious works was brought to Zacharias, but he stumbled in believing them, so his silence was used to bring even greater glory to the speaking of these words. John, his son, would also go on to be tremendously valuable in the proclamation of God's Word. John would be faithful and devoted, even to the point of martyrdom, to the message of God's salvation in Christ for us.

As we live as part of Christ's Church we also face similar situations. If we mock the holy kindness of God by doubting His Word, we run the risk of being struck mute in the presence of the Church by being placed under discipline and kept from receiving the Lord's Supper. We are prevented from proclaiming Christ's death in partaking of the Supper because our willful sinfulness and rejection of His Word cause our proclamation to be tainted and skewed. So we are made silent until we repent. But in the fullness of God's time, we may have our voices returned as our hearts are made repentant and humble. And even in the silence of church discipline, the lessons from God can still be heard as the need for repentance and His Gospel assurance of life and forgiveness are to be taken seriously and not doubted.

We pray: Lord God, thanks and praise to You for Your mercy shown to us in Jesus Christ. Make us always faithful in the proclamation of Your kind forgiveness in our crucified Lord. Amen.

The beautiful song of Mary (which we know as the Magnificat in our Vespers services) amazingly proclaims the glory of God the Father, testifies to the wonders that the child in her womb, God the Son, will accomplish, and is entirely the divine work of God the Holy Spirit. This song is one more of the profound gifts that the Lord gives to His Church for the sake of teaching us and all nations about His merciful salvation.

Like Jesus, the Magnificat was born through Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. And every aspect of this song testifies to our Lord Jesus Christ. From His promises to Adam and Eve that are fulfilled in Mary's Son, to the fact that she was favored by God to be the channel through which the Savior would come to the world, to the fact that all the history and prophesy of Israel are culminated in Him, and ultimately to His victory of the evil one, these Words testify of Him.

These glorious words further emphasize that God's work of salvation in Jesus Christ is not fickle decrees or vain abstractions. His work is His very real intervention into the created order that He established. He has been present with man from the beginning, has continued to mercifully work for our good throughout real historical events, and truly became a man of flesh and blood to earn our forgiveness. Because He has benevolently done all these things, our salvation is truly real and is the greatest blessing we have in our present life in this world.

We pray: Lord God, endless thanks and praise be to You on account of Your mercy shown to us in the flesh and blood reality of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We rightly prepare for Christ's second Advent by meditating on the love that caused His first Advent. As truly as "God is love," so truly can that love never be separated from the Person of Christ, whom the Father sent as the propitiation for our sins. Since the very beginning, God's intention was not to condemn the world, but, in love, to save it by giving His Son, that all men might know and confess Jesus as the Son of God and as the Savior of the world. It was love that moved the Son of God to become the Son of Man, and it is still love that moves God to give His Holy Spirit, to call sinners to faith and to abide in the faithful, so that when Christ comes, all may be found abiding, by faith, in Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.

A Christian's response to that love is twofold: faith toward God, and love toward our neighbor, especially toward one another as fellow Christians. Faith and love cannot be separated from one another in the life of a Christian, because both are produced by one and the same Spirit, so that the one who abides in faith abides also in love. In the time that remains before Christ comes again, may the behavior of God's children toward one another reflect the love with which God has first loved us.

Collect: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your Only-Begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The saints are characterized by faith and love as they await the coming of Christ. It cannot be otherwise, for these are the fruits that the Gospel bears as it is sown throughout the world. Where the Gospel takes root in men's hearts, it produces faith where there was only unbelief and thus creates saints where there were only sinners. Then, in those very saints, faith immediately begins to produce love for all the other saints, because we have come to know the truth of God, that we all equally deserve His wrath for our sins, but instead we have all equally received the grace of God in the sacrifice of His Son and in the forgiveness of our sins for His sake. Just as we are continually being sustained and strengthened in faith by Word and Sacrament, we are constantly being renewed and molded into the loving image of our loving God, with deeds of love that can be seen and known.

The faith and love of the saints are cause for thanksgiving to God; He is the One responsible for all of it, just as He is the One who has laid up for us the hope of eternal life in heaven. As we eagerly await that heavenly hope, may God's grace to us in Christ Jesus spur us on to ever greater faith and to ever increasing devotion to one another, that all men may know we are disciples of Christ.

Collect: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your Only-Begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

“But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”

Why is it granted to any of us that the Lord God should come to any of us? Our sinful selfishness has caused us all to ignore him and walk away from His wisdom and blessings. Yet, He still provides good gifts for us in the world. Even more, He comes to us in flesh and blood to give us peace, life, and joy.

Our God did not stand aloof and leave us to rise or fall according to our own vanities, but He became one of us so that He could truly help us. He took on our flesh and blood and He lived perfectly as one of us so that He could accomplish what none of us could. He paid the price for our sins so that we could be made acceptable to God.

God came to us because He loved the world, all mankind, and He wanted to save us by His grace and mercy, through the blessing of faith. And all these things are undeserved gifts from our Lord. There was no worthiness in us. There was no worthiness in Elizabeth, no worthiness in Mary or Joseph, no worthiness in any of us, apart from the faith that the Holy Spirit conceives in us. All good things that come to us are merciful gifts from a profoundly benevolent Lord. He comes to us in the flesh and blood of Christ Jesus, and the Gospel which tells us of our salvation in Him, simply out of His love for us. That is why He comes to us!

We pray: Lord God, endless thanks and praise be to You for Your mercy in coming to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Joseph was merciful toward Mary when he thought she had been unfaithful toward him. He could have exposed the sin that he believed she committed and let her be subject to the harsh consequences. But he chose not to, and instead showed her love and kindness.

The profound grace and providence of God is reflected in so many subtle details that surround the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus. The miracle of Christ being conceived by the Holy Ghost in the virgin Mary is an incredible thing, so it is understandable that Joseph needed an angel of the Lord to show him that Mary had not been unfaithful to him. To the contrary, she was with child *because she was faithful* to him, and to the Lord! She honored her commitment to Joseph, son of David, and she was favored in the eyes of the Lord on account of faith.

However, we have not been faithful toward God. All mankind, from Adam to David, and to Joseph and Mary, on to each one of us, has been unfaithful and sinned against the Lord. Because of that He had every right to put us away and leave us to the harshest of consequences for our own infidelity. But He showed us the greatest possible mercy. He did not seek to put us away secretly, but He redeemed us publicly! He gave His own precious Son to die for our sinful betrayals and saved us from the death that should have come upon us.

We pray: Lord God, endless thanks and praise be to You on account of Your mercy shown to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Make us always grateful for Your kind forgiveness, which allows us to live with you forever. Amen.

St. Paul instructs the saints not to take our salvation for granted as we wait for Christ, but to acknowledge with fear and trembling that it is God who works in us, through the preaching of His Word; we can do nothing without Him. Therefore, God commands us to listen to those who preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in His name, because “the preaching and hearing of God’s Word are instruments of the Holy Ghost, by, with, and through which He desires to work efficaciously, and to convert men to God, and to work in them both to will and to do.”

There is great comfort in this passage for godly Christians who feel and experience in their hearts a small spark or longing for divine grace and eternal salvation, “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.” And as the Holy Spirit works in us through His Word all the way up till the day of Christ, He urges and compels us to lead blameless lives here on earth, without complaining or arguing, and to hold fast the word of life. This we do not do in vain, for it will bring glory to God in the midst of this crooked and perverse generation, and will also result in eternal glory for us.

Collect: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your Only-Begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

St. Paul pictures the Christian life as a race, but not as a sprint. We may sprint eagerly at times toward the Bridegroom as He approaches off in the distance, but He is still just beyond our sight, and the race remains a long one, like a marathon, in which, sometimes, the “runners” are barely jogging, or almost crawling as they inch toward the finish line. The longer we run, the more weary we become as we see the world becoming more perverse all around us, as we feel our own flesh dragging us toward the ground. And yet, with the strength that only Christ’s Gospel can provide, we press on toward the goal, with the assurance that Christ Himself has laid hold of us and will not forsake us until we receive the promised prize.

Martin Luther echoes St. Paul’s words to the Philippians: “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” (AE 32:24).

Press on, dear Christian, with faith, hope, and love! Christ’s Advent is nearly in sight!

Collect: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your Only-Begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

**GOSPEL****ST. JOHN 1:19-28 (NKJV)**

Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.”

And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?”

He said, “I am not.”

“Are you the Prophet?”

And he answered, “No.”

Then they said to him, “Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?”

He said: “I am ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Make straight the way of the LORD,’” as the prophet Isaiah said.”

Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. And they asked him, saying, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

John answered them, saying, “I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. “It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.”

These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

**THE COLLECT**

Stir up O Lord, we beseech Thee, Thy power, and come and help us with Thy great might, that by Thy grace whatsoever is hindered by our sins may be speedily accomplished through Thy mercy and satisfaction; who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

At first, we see Mary troubled by the angel's greeting. How was the Lord with her in so special a way that an angel should call attention to it? This is obviously an angelic being, but is he telling her the truth? While one rightly fears an angel as a messenger of the true God, one's fear must be directed toward the Lord Himself above any angel, so while she would have the fear caused by being in the presence of one who could dwell in the presence of God, she must have some evidence that she is not being deceived.

Thus, the angel tells Mary not to be afraid because she would be the bearer of God's own Son, the promised Messiah who will reign forever. She is being especially shown God's grace: He has just declared that her vocation will be the rearing of God in human flesh! Still, every word that is true is to be established in the mouth of two or three witnesses, so she asks how she will conceive and bear this Child.

The angel supplies the evidence that is necessary: not by any human means of conception, but the Holy Spirit will cause her to conceive while remaining a virgin. To accompany this proof (which links back to Genesis 3 through, for example, Isaiah 7), the angel provides as a witness the natural—yet miraculous!—pregnancy of Mary's kinswoman, Elizabeth. With the Biblical standard for proof satisfied, Mary makes her confession of willingness, based upon her servanthood toward the One True God.

Thank you, O Holy Spirit, that you have given us a faith that is not apart from fact, but fully established upon it. Grant us more certainly to learn Your Word, that we happily receive God's will because of the confidence that the facts of our salvation give us.

The season of Advent is brief, but the mindset of Advent is to be the Christian's mindset at all times: We have nothing but sin and shame to claim as our own. We deserve to be forever doomed to destruction together with this world. But we have been baptized into Christ. Christ is our life. And Christ is coming soon. So, even though we still live on this earth for a little while longer, our true life is not here.

Thus Paul urges us to live out our earthly days accordingly. If our true life is in heaven, wrapped up with Christ, soon to be revealed, then it is time to get rid of the things that our old man lives for here below. It is time to put to death those old sinful passions and practices, those priorities that are so important to the sons of disobedience, but that hinder the Christian's sanctification. Christians should not be deceived into thinking they can hold onto their faith and salvation "even though they indulge their wicked lusts without fear and shame, resist the Holy Spirit, and purposely engage in sins against conscience."

Instead, as children of light, as sons of the day, as those who have put off the old man and have put on the new, let us also put off the old ways of the old man and grow up into the image of Christ, who is all and in all.

Collect: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your Only-Begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

**THE GOSPEL**

ST. MATTHEW 11:2-10 (NKJV)

And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, “Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?”

Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.”

As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: ‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.’”

**THE COLLECT**

Lord, we beseech You, give ear to our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your visitation; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

In distinction from how the angel will appear to Mary in tomorrow’s reading, he appears to Zacharias spouting all the promises of whom John the Baptist would be, and firmly rooting them in the prophecy of Malachi. Zacharias was married, so other than his and his wife’s advanced age—which was no problem for God in dealing with Abram and Sarai!—there was no reason for him to question what the angel said. He could go home from his service at the Temple and what Gabriel said would happen would, indeed, happen.

Zacharias, though, asks the question how it was that he would experience this joy, since he and Elizabeth were old. That is, he wasn’t looking for evidence of how he would know that these words were true, but was openly discounting them. Because of this, and since there was no sign like Mary would be given that would be available—her conceiving while remaining a virgin and having her elderly kinswoman also being pregnant—Gabriel told Zacharias that his tongue that had just confessed unbelief would not be loosed until he would confess that God’s promise was true, not only that the birth that had taken place was prophesied by Gabriel, but that the time had come for repentance for all, because John would be the forerunner of the Christ, and through the Christ forgiveness of sins would be won for all.

“O Lord, open Thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Thy praise.” Apart from your Word giving me faith, I have nothing worth saying; grant, therefore, that I may never speak from unbelief, but have my lips opened only by the Gospel of Christ in which You cause me to trust. Amen.



Patience may rightly be reckoned as “faith over an extended period of time.” That is, a lack of patience is a matter of lacking faith. When we are impatient with others, we are that way because we don’t believe that they will improve—or, maybe, that they are even trying.

Considering that all men are sinners—even all Christians, even those closest and dearest to us—we may well feel justified in our impatience with them. Yet, the Holy Spirit has St. James write to us that we are not to grumble against one another in such impatience. This is akin to what Luther writes in the Large Catechism concerning our sins against the Fifth Commandment: even though others provoke us, we cannot do them harm. (Luther speaks about us as vengeful individuals here; he is not speaking against defending another in an emergency even with violence, soldiers involved in justly waged wars, or anything of that nature.)

Instead, we endure them even as our Lord has had to endure us, even as His prophets then and His pastors now have had to speak God’s Word and suffer its (and their) being abused, not seeing the results—the ‘crop’—as they sowed.

James tells us to remember St. Job and to keep our eyes fixed on the Lord’s compassion, mercy, and the intended end He has for us, as then we will persevere. That is, recall that you were Baptized not just for that day, but for today, as well, and, indeed, for all eternity, as in Baptism you were connected with the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, so that you shall also certainly be raised for all eternity in Him.

Grant us patience, O Heavenly Father, that we may portray for our brethren the same grace in which we trust You to look at us for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

When the writer of Hebrews bids us not to throw away our confidence, he is not simply telling us not to lose our faith. The word used here refers to ‘outspokenness’—to boldness in confessing what the Christ has done for us. This word can refer to brashness or a licentious use of the tongue. Here, though, it is clearly that we are not to be cowed by the world and its persistent attacks upon us who trust in the One who was coming, Who has come, and Who is yet to come in glory to judge the quick and the dead. While they boldly proclaim that His having not returned yet is some mark against Him, we must boldly proclaim that the work He did when He first appeared is no less certain now than then, and that He delays as a display of His mercy that desires the salvation of all.

The one who draws back from this confession draws back unto eternal death, because faith lives itself out in such words and deeds by the believer. If the faith is denied, how can it abide? A righteous one is righteous only by faith, so by faith he has life and by faith he lives. If he would not so live, is he not despising the gift of life in Christ? God mercifully grant, then, by the Holy Spirit’s working through the message of Christ read, spoken, washed over us, and fed to us, that we would not shrink back from the confident profession of this faith, but be those believing unto the saving of the soul!

O Holy Spirit, grant that we do not shrink back from the faith you have given us in the Christ, but boldly confess that we who deserve nothing but death now have eternal life in Him. Amen.

That “Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” is horribly misunderstood, simply because even most Christians don’t understand who “the Gentiles” are and what “Jerusalem” is. Thus, many of the Baptist and Pentecostal televangelists wish to say that the end is upon us because the Gentiles are no longer trampling Jerusalem, but it has been restored to the nation of Israel.

“Israel” is now properly used to refer to the Church—those who live by being made a new creature by faith in the crucified Christ (Galatians 6). Israel is now made up of those who have received the circumcision not made with human hands (Colossians 2:11-15), Holy Baptism, through which all are made “children of God who inherit what is His” (Galatians 3:1–4:1) through faith in the blood of Christ. Indeed, not only are you—the Church—now called “Israel” in Holy Scripture, but you are even the Temple, the house built with living stones to offer up sacrifices of thanksgiving to God in every aspect of your life. You are the new Jerusalem, the holy city in which God dwells, where He is present to bless always.

You, O Jerusalem, are still trampled on by the Gentiles—those of Jewish blood and those not—as they play at being ‘Church’ but do not proclaim the faith in which you are bold to trust and to speak. Yet, unlike the Jerusalem of the flesh, you shine forth all the brighter for such trampling, as the glory and the strength of Jesus that uphold you are all the clearer.

Grant us a clear view from Your Word, O Triune God, of the high status you have given us in Christ, without any merit or worthiness in us, that we may live as Your holy nation, Your living Temple. Amen.

Each one according to what you have been given, be faithful!

Peter asks a question that gives us insight into how the language of Jesus works: “Is this for us or for all?” The answer is, “Yes... according to each one’s station.” That is, as in several other places, especially when our Lord addresses only the Twelve, there is a primary audience or referent for what He says and also a secondary audience or referent. The Apostles—and, thus, all on the Office of the Holy Ministry—are to be ever girded and ready, serving as they have been appointed, faithfully administering the Word of God to each one according to his need.

Thus, the pastor must apply the Law to condemn the sins of, especially, the hardened and the cold, and must supply the Gospel to the one with a terrified conscience. In one place, the Word must be spoken and explained; in another, perhaps a written form will better serve the sinner’s need for reprimand or for consolation; in yet another, it must be the Word being applied with an emphasis on what receiving the Lord’s Supper both does and indicates.

At the same time, the Christian who is not in the Pastoral Office is to be faithful in distributing God’s gifts in whatever sphere or realm of life he operates, according to his various vocations. The gifts of physical sustenance must be faithfully applied to one’s children, for instance, and so must be the gifts that build the faith as the parents lead their children in learning and confessing the Catechism, singing the liturgy and hymns, and so on.

Lord grant that we love You above all, knowing that we will only truly love and be of service to others when we do so from our love for and trust in You. Amen.