



### ***Visitation of St. Paul Ev. Lutheran Church (Taylorsville, NC)***

Bishop Heiser's final scheduled visitation for 2011 took him to North Carolina, where he visited with Pastor Hunter and the Members of St. Paul. As bishop of the diocese, Pastor Heiser endeavors to visit each parish of the diocese at least one a year, but storms caused his 2010 visit to Taylorsville to be cancelled—making it all the more joyful to have an opportunity to “catch up” with the parish. St. Paul's is doing well, steadfastly uphold the good confession. Members of the parish were eager to receive an update on the work of the diocese—especially regarding mission work, and seminary plans.



# THE LUTHERAN HERALD



DECEMBER 2011

(ADVENT I—CHRISTMASTIDE)

*The Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America*

## THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

### 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.



Bishop Heiser, Pastor Mueller and members of Redeemer Lutheran Church (Cambridge, MN)



Bishop Heiser meeting with members of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church (harrison, AR)



## Episcopal Visitations

A regular part of the oversight responsibilities of the diocesan bishop is to conduct visitations of the pastors of the diocese and the congregations entrusted to their care. Such visitations provide the bishop with an opportunity to oversee the life and doctrine of the pastors of our fellowship, and to inform the parishes of the work of the diocese. In the past quarter, Bishop Heiser has visited several of the parishes affiliated with the diocese, including:

- Christ Lutheran Church (Richmond, MO)
- Redeemer Lutheran Church (Cambridge, MN)
- St. Matthew Lutheran Mission (Mayer, MN)
- Good Shepherd Lutheran Church (Tony, WI)
- Holy Trinity Lutheran Church (Harrison, AR)
- Trinity Lutheran Church (Herrin, IL)
- Holy Cross Lutheran Church (Peoria, IL)
- St. Paul Ev. Lutheran Church (Taylorsville, NC)



Pastor Hudson and Christ Lutheran Church (Richmond, MO)

## THURSDAY, DECEMBER 1: GENESIS 49:1-28

## ADVENT 1

*"The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to Him shall be the obedience of the people. . . . He washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes."*

This text is often called the blessing that Israel has for his twelve sons, but for the most part it sounds like the final scolding of a father to his disobedient children. But like all the other texts for this week, we are presented with a Messianic prophecy. "The scepter shall not depart from Judah." In other words, a King shall rule over the spiritual house of Judah for all eternity.

That King is our Lord Jesus Christ, Who washed His garments in the wine of His own Blood on the tree of the holy Cross. He washed His clothes in the "blood of grapes."

This imagery cannot help but draw to our minds the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar, where in, with, and under the wine we receive our Lord Jesus Christ's true and substantial Blood for the remission of our sins.

It is of no little coincidence that the Kingship of our Lord is tied to the shedding of His Blood on the holy Cross. This is His throne; this is the place where the disobedient spiritual children of Israel are redeemed from sin, death, and the devil. It is on the tree of the holy Cross where our Lord reigns as King of kings and Lord of lords for all eternity. And it is here, that our Lord comes and sustains all of those who have a share in the inheritance through faith, by pouring into their lips and hearts the Holy Ghost through the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar.

*“A Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy all the sons of tumult.”*

The Church Year is divided up into three major sections: Christmastide, Eastertide, and Whitsuntide. Each of these major divisions coincides with three of the four High Feasts of the Church Year. The Church Year begins with Christmastide; this includes the three seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. The overarching theme of this season is “Light.”

In this Advent season, we sit in darkness, and in the shadow of the Light that is to come. However, we have from our text today the promise of “a Star” that “shall come out of Jacob.” This Star is our Lord Jesus Christ; Whose Light shines in the darkness, and dispels the gloom of sin and death.

The Light of our Lord Jesus Christ fills the whole world during this season, by proclaiming to the ears of all the world that He has come into this dark world to dwell in our flesh, and “batter the brow of Moab,” that is, the powers of sin, death and the devil.

He batters the brow of Moab, and destroys all the sons of tumult by offering up His perfect obedience to the Law on the tree of the holy Cross in our place. He comes to us, sheds His Light upon us, and suffers our penalty; all that we might have forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation. And so that we might have it abundantly, He destroys the powers of death and hell, in order that we might rejoice eternally in our redemption, stepping out of the darkness of sin and death, into the Light of our eternal reward.

“Everyone who thirsts” is a Law declaration that we are lacking righteousness (Mt. 5:6).

“Come to the waters,” is a Gospel invitation that God desires to fill up our lack with Jesus’ righteousness (Jn. 4:10).

“And you who have no money” is a Law declaration that due to our sinfulness we are unable to secure the price for our own redemption (Ps. 49:7).

“Come, buy and eat,” is a Gospel invitation by which God provides for us the bread of life (John 6:33).

“Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price,” teaches that salvation is given freely (Eph. 2:5). The purchase price was not our silver or gold, but the redemption secured by our heavenly Father “with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

“Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy?” is God’s declaration that our own striving whether by “good” works to achieve eternal joys or by sinful pleasures to enjoy earthly lusts will not satisfy our souls. Augustine was right when he said, “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.”

“Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance,” is God’s promise that through the hearing of God’s Word and the inward digesting of that Word in true faith and trust, we will have a satisfied soul. “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).



Psalms 127:3, 5 says, “Children are a heritage from the Lord . . . happy is the man who has his quiver full of them.” In Isaiah 49 we hear about the arrow bag of the heavenly Father and His only Son, Jesus—the polished arrow hidden inside: “In the shadow of His hand He has hidden Me, and made Me a polished shaft; in His quiver He has hidden Me.”

The entire Old Testament presents to us a hidden Savior. This is not to say that Jesus does not appear or that He is absent. Already when Adam and Eve sinned, the Savior was promised as the male offspring of the woman who would crush the head of the Ancient Serpent, the Devil. Prophecies concerning Jesus abound in the Old Testament.

Nevertheless, Jesus is not yet revealed until “The Lord has called Me from the womb; from the matrix of My mother He has made mention of My name” (v.1). The sending of the angelic messenger to the shepherds that night (Lk. 2:10-13) begins the revelation and fulfillment of all those hidden prophecies. The name is declared: “He is Christ, the Lord.”

Your appointed messenger repeats the words of the multitude of the heavenly host: Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men! (Gloria in Excelsis). Swaddling clothes, Bethlehem, a star, etc. and then finally the sign of the cross by which the Father declares of Jesus, “You should be My Servant to raise up . . . and to restore . . . I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.”

*“I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.”*

In this Advent season we prepare for our Lord’s coming in three ways: His coming in the flesh, His coming in Word and Sacrament, and His coming at the Last Day. Today’s text embodies all three of these themes. A Prophet like the Israelites Who will come from them corresponds to our Lord’s coming in the flesh. He is born into the tribe of Judah as in our flesh.

Our Lord God put His Word into the mouth of His One and Only Son, so that He might fulfill the Law perfectly for us, and preach to the fallen house of Israel repentance toward the remission of sin. This corresponds to the theme of our Lord Jesus coming to us in Word and Sacrament. As He came to the Israelites by the preaching of His Word, He comes to us today, by the pure preaching of His Word and the right administration of His Sacraments.

Our Lord’s coming at the Last Day is embodied in the words which demand that those who refuse to hear the Word of our Lord; it will be required of them. This refers to the judgment on the Last Day. The sheep and goats will be separated; the sheep on the right, the goats on the left. The sheep, those who believed the Word of our Lord, will receive eternal life. The goats, those who refused to believe the Word of our Lord, will receive eternal condemnation. Therefore, let us prepare for the coming of our Lord, with contrition and faith, and receive the forgiveness of our sins.

## THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

### 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.

## THURSDAY, DECEMBER 29: ISAIAH 46:3-13 5<sup>TH</sup> DAY OF CHRISTMAS

“For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me.” The words of the Gloria in Excelsis sung at the Divine Service each Sunday and holy day, teach the exclusivity of our Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit: “For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord, you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father.”

Our God cannot be manipulated or bribed. In human terms, a person must have a self-interested desire for something in order for him to be manipulated. The Jewish leaders manipulated Pilate into killing Jesus by threatening Pilate with actions which would lead to him being reported to Caesar and losing his job. God will not be bribed by our offerings or good works, because He needs none of them.

Our God saved us “because of His great love for us” (Eph. 2:4-5). He upheld us from our holy baptismal calling into a spiritual birth. He carried us from the womb so that we might be gathered into the Church, taught by the Word, and enlightened by His gifts. He has sanctified us by His Holy Spirit. In the gray hairs of our old age, He will carry us and keep us in the true faith. There is no God as selfless as our Triune God! To whom will you compare Him?

We do trust in the Triune God! He says, “My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure” (v.10). God desires to save us by bringing near to us the righteousness of Jesus Christ.



They received an award for “Family of the Year” and the long list of that year’s activities in their Christmas letter was more than five families could accomplish. Despite their reputation and outward appearance, I knew them to be a rather dysfunctional family. The Prophet Isaiah said that the lying discrepancies of the judgments in this life will come to an end. “The foolish person will no longer be called generous, nor the miser said to be bountiful” (v.5).

How will this happen? Answer: “A man will be as a hiding place . . .” (v.2). Now that’s an unusual thing for a man to be—a hiding place! We hide behind our flurry of activities, so that we don’t have to endure the driving accusing wind of the law. We hide behind our reputation, as a cover from the raging tempest of sinful desires within. We hide behind our excuses and more excuses for our dried up well of good works.

Jesus is our hiding place for all sins of thought, word and action. “Behold, a King will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice.” Jesus is our reigning King. His righteousness is given us in exchange for our sinfulness and sins. His princes are the Apostles (and pastors who follow in their train, (Ac. XXVIII, 5-7, Primacy 26)) “who will rule with justice” (v.1). They will not judge by outward appearances (Isaiah 11:3, John 7:24), but will make just rulings based on the application of God’s Word concerning King Jesus and His justification. All who confess their sins and believe in Jesus will be declared righteous with their sins hidden away in Jesus.

Humility and exaltation are two terms we use to describe our Lord Jesus. The humility is shown by His becoming man, living the life God expects of us, and then suffering death on the cross that sinners rightly deserve. His exaltation begins with His descent into hell where He proclaimed His victory over “the old evil foe” and culminated with His ascending into heaven where He now sits at the right hand of God in all power, glory, and might, ruling over all of God’s creation.

But as we carefully look at the reading from 1 Chron. 17, we also see the humility of our Lord God in how He dealt with His people of old. From the time of the Exodus, the Lord made His presence known to His people. First it was the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar fire by night. God used the things of His creation to make His presence known. Later, the almighty God, the creator of all that is, would dwell in a rather lowly place... a tent... while the one He had chosen to rule over Israel, King David, lived in a house of cedar.

What we see in our Lord is the willingness to give to others what rightly belongs to Him alone... righteousness and holiness. That giving began in your Baptism and continues in Holy Absolution and the Lord’s Supper. All that God desires of you to be, He has given you for Jesus’ sake.

After Solomon had completed the task that his father, David, had longed to do, that is, the building of “the house of the Lord,” God issued a warning to Solomon: Solomon and the children of Israel were to remain faithful God and not “embrace” other gods. As we know, such faithfulness did not last and the people turned their backs on the God who had saved them rather than “turn from their wicked ways” to Him. And as God foretold, the people were uprooted driven into captivity.

Over the course of centuries, the children of Israel would prove unfaithful, later repent, be restored, only to repeat the process. Along the way, the “house” made of stone, the Temple, would be destroyed, rebuilt, and destroyed again. However, God continued to prove faithful in spite of Israel’s unfaithfulness. The house of David “will be there perpetually.” God preserved His perpetual house and showed His faithfulness in the incarnation of His only-begotten son. What Israel could not be, that is faithful, God’s only-begotten Son would be.

The faithfulness of Christ to His Father withstood the very gates of hell as Christ was forsaken on the Cross. Christ believed what the children of Israel would not. Christ believed His Father was a God of grace and that He who “became sin for us” would not be abandoned to the grave but would be raised from the dead as His Father had promised. Christ had trusted His Father without wavering and He has promised that though we may waver He will keep us in the true faith.

Micah 4:3, “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more,” is often quoted by American presidents when they speak about earthly war and civil peace. However, Micah 4:3 comes to fulfillment in the peaceful rest of Christ’s believing members in His Church. Jesus’ birth has ushered in “the latter days” (4:1).

We are invited to live in the Gospel of Jesus—the mountain of the Lord’s house, which is above all other mountains. In Christ’s Church, “He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths” (v.2). We are taught to reject the works-righteous walk of other gods (v.5), and trust in Christ’s righteousness received by faith.

In Deuteronomy 7, we see that the Israelite nation acquired lands and homes and wells by fighting and displacing other nations. Through Christ’s fighting for us, Christ will assemble a holy Church. “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more” (v.3). Christ is not looking for “a few good (fighting) men.” Through the Word and Sacrament, God is assembling the lame, the outcasts, and the afflicted. Through Christ’s victorious fight over sin, we weak ones become “a strong nation” (v.7).

Through the birth of Jesus Christ, God installs His Prince of peace, who reigns over His Church “from now on, even forever.” “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18). “Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way. The Lord be with you all” (2 Thessalonians 3:16).



The resurrection of our Lord is celebrated on a Sunday every year, but the celebration of our Lord's birth, being fixed on December 25<sup>th</sup>, moves through the days of the week from year to year. This year it graces Sunday, next year it graces Tuesday.

The Israelites had abandoned their trust in God and therefore He "gave them up" (v.3) and they were scattered throughout the nations. "By nature," each of us is among the abandoned and "objects of wrath" (Eph. 2:3). No matter what day we were born and no matter from what nation we came, we are "in bondage" (Gal. 4:3). The Prophet Micah tells us that in the birth of Jesus Christ to the Blessed Virgin Mary (v.3) God is bringing back the remnant of His people. "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:3-5).

We are those "having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever" (1 Peter 1:23). Jesus, our Ruler in Israel, continues to "stand and feed His flock" each and every day of the week. St. Luke in the book of Acts picks up Micah's words that this Gospel message about Jesus goes out "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

The promise spoken by God to Solomon that the house of David "will be there perpetually," is echoed by the Prophet Isaiah: "There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of His roots."

By the time of the birth of Jesus, the grandeur of the House of David was long gone. In its place was Roman rule. The monarchy of Israel had been cut down and all that remained was the stump. Yet, out of the ruin God would bring forth the One He had promised but not in the grandeur that one would expect for the Monarch. Instead, the King of Israel is born in a stable and His first bed is a manger.

The "shoot" grew into a "branch" and the promise spoken by Isaiah was fulfilled at our Lord's Baptism: "And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him." Jesus executes the Father's plan of salvation flawlessly. He enters a world filled with sin and dies in the place of sinners. Jesus' judgment of the people of this world is not based upon their works, "what His eyes see" on the outside. Instead, He judges in mercy, taking the judgment for sin upon Himself. He looks upon the world with compassion, forgiving sins for His own name's sake.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks of God's judgment upon unfaithful "shepherds": "I will attend to you for your evil deeds." Though the sheep allowed themselves to be led astray and are held accountable for the sin of turning away from God, the "shepherds" "will be judged with greater strictness" as St. James wrote.

Yet, God's promise is that though many will be led astray, He will preserve a remnant. Though many an earthly shepherd will have failed, God will provide a perfect "Shepherd." Like the prophet Isaiah, Jeremiah also speaks of the "Branch" whom He will raise up. God will send One who "shall reign as King and deal wisely."

We can easily become discouraged as we look about and see so many unfaithful "shepherds." While claiming to tend the sheep, they feed them with all manner of junk food, which is the false doctrine that satisfies the goats while leaving the sheep malnourished. We may find ourselves wondering why God allows these congregations to grow while congregations who remain faithful dwindle in size. "'My ways are not your ways,' declares the Lord." We can rest assured that our Father in Heaven, indeed, knows what He is doing just as the faithful remnant in Israel trusted in God as they were led into captivity along with unfaithful whose unfaithfulness brought captivity upon the whole of Israel. Though with the eyes of our flesh we may only see a few people, the eyes of faith remind us that we are surrounded by the countless company of heaven who together with us say, "The LORD is our righteousness."

**FEAST OF THE HOLY NATIVITY****The Holy Gospel****St. Luke 2:15-20 (NKJV)**

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us. And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

**The COLLECT**

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 the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end.



*“Yet out of you [Bethlehem] shall come forth to Me the One to be ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” (v. 2b)*

Bethlehem is nothing. It is just a little town, really quite insignificant. For that matter, Mary is just a teenage girl, a member of a minority ethnic group who lives (as far as the Romans are concerned) in the wasteland outback of the Empire. We have here a place and a person that, as far as anyone can tell, would never amount to anything.

Well, people can make their guesses, but God does what He wants. He has chosen Bethlehem. He has chosen Mary. Through this woman and in this town, the Savior of the world is given to us! He is the One who will live a sinless life, die a sacrificial death, rise again in victory, and inaugurate a new creation.

The same gracious God has His way with us. He has already given us all that the saving work of Christ accomplished. Now here we are, most of us unimportant people in the eyes of the world. Most of us belong to ELDoNA or the ACLC, small groups of believers by almost any measurement. We will never make anything of ourselves. That was never in question. But what can God make of us? This night, consider the manger, rejoice in Christ's forgiveness, and know that you have a God who can have greater use of you than you ever dreamed.

**Suggested Hymn:** *“A Great and Mighty Wonder”* (TLH 76, LSB 383)

God's chastisement of His people was, and still is, an act of love. Our Lord never forgot His people as shown by God sending prophets with His Holy Word. Throughout the course of the history of the Children of Israel, we hear of their unfaithfulness to God. Though they turned from Him, He continued to call them to repentance and issued His warning of the punishment that would follow should they not repent. In the midst of unfaithfulness, there remained a remnant that God preserved in the true faith. His faithful people were in this world and suffered not only the consequences of their sins, but also the consequences of the sins of the unfaithful.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks to their pain and suffering. Faithful and unfaithful alike will suffer under oppression. But in the midst of suffering joy is to be found by those whom God preserves in faith. God promised to restore them to health and heal them.

For the Children of Israel, their promised restoration was two-fold. In time, they would be return to the land of their fathers. But more importantly, their real problem, sin, would dealt with once and for all by One who “shall come out of their midst.” As a result of the work of Jesus, they would see the day of real restoration. On that day, the Last Day, they would be ushered into the new heavens and the new earth as will you.

Jeremiah echoes what we read earlier in chapter 23, “The LORD is our righteousness,” and what we read in the prophet Isaiah of a “Branch.” God had spoken many warnings through Jeremiah of Israel’s need to repent. In this section of Jeremiah 33, God will speak to His faithful people with words of reassurance.

Israel had broken the covenant they had with God. They did not do what they had promised. Now God speaks with a bit of irony. God speaks of Israel’s ability to break another covenant, God’s “covenant with the day and... with the night.” If Israel can stop day and night coming at their appointed times, then the covenant God made “David my servant may be broken.” The obvious point God is making with such an outlandish proposal that somehow Israel could interfere in God upholding day and night was to speak words of comfort to His faithful people. Nothing, not even man and man’s sin, could ever get in the way of God saving His people.

Israel’s covenant with God was based on God’s Law which Law they could never keep. The fact that Israel broke their covenant with God only proved that they needed God and His mercy. Salvation would only and could only come from and through God’s grace and not through His Law. Salvation then, in the days of the Children of Israel, and now is purely an act of our gracious God and only for Jesus’ sake.

*“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.” (v. 14)*

Ahaz, King of Judah, is surrounded. The kings of Israel and Syria have come against him, to wage war against him. The Lord, by way of his prophet Isaiah, gives King Ahaz a sign of his deliverance. “The virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.”

Many people have wondered, “What kind of reassurance is that? His city is under siege, and God tells him, ‘don’t worry, 600 years from now a virgin will have a baby?’” Some have even gone so far as to imagine that Isaiah was not speaking of the coming of the Christ! More to the point, many in our day ask a very similar question: “I face all these real-world problems, and your answer is that a virgin had a baby 2,000 years ago?”

Yes! That is precisely the point. God has become man in the person of Christ Jesus, to die on the cross and take away your sin. He is risen from the dead, and has thus opened the way of everlasting life to you. Your sin and the threat of damnation was the biggest problem you ever faced, or ever could face. Whatever the other problems may be that have you surrounded, the God who addressed your greatest need by sending His Son can surely be trusted to see you through your present difficulties as well. Thanks be to God for the gift of Immanuel!

**Suggested Hymn:** *“Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel”* (TLH 62, LSB 357)



*“Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation.” (v. 16)*

Israel had forsaken the faith. The Lord chastises them for making “a covenant with death,” a deal with the devil, if you will. But God promises to overthrow that: “the hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and the water will overflow the hiding place. Your covenant with death will be annulled.”

This will come about as the result of the “precious cornerstone,” Who is revealed to us in the New Testament as Jesus Christ Himself. The cornerstone, in ancient construction, was the determining factor in the laying of the rest of the foundation of a building, and ultimately in the construction of the entire building!

So it is with Christ. Those who in their unbelief refuse to be “brought in line” (through repentance and forgiveness of sins) with Christ our cornerstone are cast off, swept away, and damned. Nevertheless, as Isaiah says, “Whoever believes will not act hastily.” Rather, with deliberate and sober judgment, we who believe faithfully examine ourselves, repent of our sins, and receive Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the confident hope of life everlasting.

**Suggested Hymn:** *“Christ Is Our Corner-Stone”* (TLH 465, LSB 912)

**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.

This week the texts for our devotions are taken from the Book of Isaiah, sometimes called the Fifth Gospel or the Old Testament Gospel, because it is so filled with God's message of both Law and Gospel.

In chapter 1:2, Isaiah writes, "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the Lord has spoken: 'I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me; The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib; But Israel does not know, My people do not consider.'" God's charge is that His people do not know Him. That is condemning law.

However, in Isaiah 2:3 he writes that in the latter days, at the mountain of the Lord's house, "Many people shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.'" Here God shows Himself as a loving and merciful God.

This is a picture of us and our on again/off again relationship with our Holy God. In our blindness, we follow our own sinful paths. Then God, by means of His Law, brings us to repent, to confess our sins, and to turn again to God's means of grace.

As you and I gather around God's Word and His Holy Sacraments, He is indeed teaching us of His salvation in Jesus Christ. In these latter days our prayer is: Lord, do not leave us in our blindness, but give us true faith in Your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

*"But to you who fear My name, The Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings." (v. 2a)*

The prophet Malachi warns that "the great and dreadful day of the Lord" is coming. Before that happens, the Lord of hosts tells us that He will first "send you Elijah the prophet." We know from the words of the Lord Jesus Himself that John the Baptist was the fulfillment of this promised coming of Elijah.

There is good news, and bad news, and good news. The first good news is that the wicked are not always going to get away with it. So often, even Christians lament that cheaters do prosper, nice guys really do finish last, and it is the evildoers who seem to be ahead of the game. They will not always be. "All who do wickedly will be stubble . . . the day . . . shall burn them up."

The bad news is that you are the wicked who deserve to be burned up! It does not matter if you have committed some "really heinous" sins or you're just a common, ordinary, "by nature sinful and unclean" person. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We all "do wickedly."

Thanks be to God, there is more good news. The Sun of Righteousness has arisen. Our Lord Jesus Christ has come to us, with healing in His wings. His sacrifice on the Cross has purchased the healing of the world, He is risen from the dead, and all who believe in Him receive His healing! You are healed of all your wickedness by Jesus Christ—The Sun of Righteousness.

**Suggested Hymn:** *"Hark, a Thrilling Voice is Sounding"* (TLH 60, LSB 345)

*“But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?” (v.2)*

As the Old Testament draws to a close, we receive the promise that “the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple.” In Advent, we typically consider the “threefold coming” of the Lord . . . that He came to us once as an infant, that He comes to us now in Word and Sacrament, and that He will come again in glory. In all three cases, we might well ask, “Is this good news, or bad news?”

According to the Law, it cannot but be bad news. “Who can endure the day of His coming?” By nature, no man can! If the Law were God’s only word to us, the angels should have slain the shepherds, not sung to them. Holy Communion would always be received to our judgment, not beneficially. And the day of our Lord’s final coming in glory would seal the doom we all deserve . . . it would be the day we were called to account for all of our sins.

Thanks be to God, He speaks to us another word, the word of Gospel. Malachi answers the questions he poses above: “He is like a refiner’s fire and like a fuller’s soap.” Jesus comes, that he may purify us, and cleanse us by shedding His blood for the forgiveness of our sins.

**Suggested Hymn:** *“Ye Sons of Men, Oh, Harken”* (TLH 75, LSB 354)

You and I don’t have to listen to radio or TV news very long, or just look around our neighborhood or at our church or into our own hearts to realize that this world is seriously flawed. We know Jesus was right when He said, “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Matt. 15:19). In this world we will have all kinds of problems and suffering. That’s just the way it is! Sin has corrupted our world and sin has corrupted our hearts and lives. These facts could be very discouraging for us because, of ourselves, we cannot do anything to fix our situation.

However, in our reading from Isaiah we are reminded that all these earthly things are passing away and that our loving Lord is building something new, something perfect, which He is building for us, His children. As baptized believers in Jesus Christ, those who have been redeemed by Christ, we have been brought into this new kingdom. There, as Peter Abelard writes in his hymn, “Oh, What their Joy” (HS 838, vs. 3):

“In new Jerusalem joy shall be found,  
Blessings of peace shall forever abound;  
Wish and fulfillment are not severed there,  
Nor the things prayed for come short of the prayer”

Indeed, eternal joy is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In the first chapter of the Book of Isaiah the Lord makes it clear that Judah and Jerusalem were very sinful. In the Ten Commandments God makes it clear that you and I are very sinful. We deserve whatever punishment we receive, and more.

But in verse 8 of our text we see one of the most tender passages of the whole Bible: “He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces.” What an unexpected result for sinful people! And what an unexpected way the Lord accomplished this!

You see, He did this by means of a cross. It was on the Cross that Jesus died the death we deserve. It was on the Cross that Christ took our sin, our tears, and our death upon Himself to reunite us to our heavenly Father.

As St. Paul writes in Colossians 1:19-20, “For it pleased the Father that . . . by Him [that is, Christ] to reconcile all things to Himself . . . having made peace through the blood of His cross.”

Indeed, we were once alienated from God, but now He has reconciled us in the body of His flesh through death, to present us holy and blameless and irreproachable in His sight (Col 1:21-22).

Thanks be to God that it pleased the Father to work in His mysterious ways to reconcile us to Himself in Christ! Amen.

“‘*Comfort, yes, comfort My people!*’ Says your God.” (v. 1)

The children of Israel had repeatedly broken the holy law of God. Even so, their disobedience wasn’t so much the real problem, as it was the symptom of the real problem. The real problem was that they didn’t love God . . . they did not “fear, love and trust in God above all things.” They did not have faith. They had forsaken the salvation that God wanted to give them.

So often, the only way for people to see the error of their ways is to let the consequences of those errors come home to roost. God would allow His people to be conquered by a foreign enemy, along with all the deaths and lootings and other indignities that come with being conquered. On top of that, they would be carried off into exile far, far away from the Promised Land.

Would all this suffering be enough to atone for their sin? No, of course not. Sinful mortals cannot possibly offer a perfect sacrifice sufficient in the eyes of God to pay for their sins, no matter what we suffer here on earth. It is for this reason that God the Son assumed our human flesh and was born of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Jesus Christ assumed our humanity, so to redeem our humanity by dying on the cross. This is the comfort Isaiah prophesied. This is the comfort in which we live, the comfort that all our sins are more than paid for by our Savior Jesus Christ.

**Suggested Hymn:** “*Comfort, Comfort, Ye My People*” (TLH 61, LSB 347)



**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.

Our text for today is a song of praise. “In that day,” that is, the time of the final deliverance of God’s holy people, the Church will sing a song of praise; for His redemption is established as a strong defense so that no enemy is able to take away the blessings God has given to His redeemed people.

The heavenly hosts cry, “Open the gates” so that the righteous ones, those faithful to the Lord and His Word, may enter in. All those who remain faithful to the covenant God made with them are welcomed into the heavenly mansions. The peace of God which passes all understanding rests upon those who belong to His holy church and cling to Him in true faith.

“Trust in the Lord forever,” for in the Lord is our everlasting strength. He is our strength, our fortress, the One who keeps us through the trials and tribulations of life. He overcomes all enemies for us—the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. He casts down all who presume to oppose Him, the unbelievers who threaten God’s church. He raises up those who trust in His salvation.

God, the only Righteous One, “weighs the path of the just.” He is the One who makes it possible for His people to trust in His salvation, possible for His people to conduct themselves uprightly. Thus all glory for the believer’s life of sanctification is given to God alone. And so we, His people, continually sing a song of praise for His deliverance. Amen.

Three times in chapter 51 the Lord says to His people, “Listen to Me,” (vss. 1, 4, 7). In verse 1 God reminds them that He is the One who brought them forth from an old man and an old woman, who couldn’t have children. In verse 4 God reminds His people that He had made them His own, given them His Law and His righteousness, and brought them to the Promised Land. In verse 7 He reminds His people to listen to His Word, which He placed in their hearts, because there are dire consequences for not listening.

Every day this week Isaiah reminded the Israelites about what God had done for them and was continuing to do for them, but they kept forgetting!

As we read these scripture texts, he reminds us that we, too, sin much. We try to separate ourselves from God. And every day this week Isaiah reminded us that God saved us, not by our good deeds and not by our keeping of the Law, but “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying” (Titus 3:5-8).

We daily need reminding of God’s love and mercy, shown to us sinners, and we daily give Him all glory for bestowing on us His grace. Amen.

In our readings for this past week, God, through the Prophet Isaiah, has been showing His people their sin and their failure to worship Him. He tells them of the consequences of their actions and attitudes and what He was doing about these things. Like us, the Israelites had sold themselves away for nothing (v.3). But He continues, “And you shall be redeemed without money.” God speaks of this future redemption in a way that clearly reveals that it will be accomplished. There is no doubt.

In the following chapter, He very clearly lays out how this redemption will be accomplished. He will send His Suffering Servant. He will come, that’s a promise. Isaiah goes on to describe what this Servant does. God’s people ought to immediately recognize Him from the Word.

But mankind fails to see Him, fails to believe in Him, and fails to trust the salvation He brings. So God, rich in mercy, gives us again and again His Word of truth; He brings us to baptism, bestowing on us the Holy Spirit, opening our eyes to see and our hearts to believe that this salvation has been accomplished and it is ours by grace.

In this Advent season, we hear again God’s promises from the beginning to the end of time. Soon we will celebrate again His coming in the flesh to redeem God’s chosen people and bring them to His Holy City, the New Jerusalem for all eternity. Amen.