

Clergy of the ELDoNA, affiliated congregations and missions, and sister churches

Rt. Rev. James Heiser

Salem Lutheran Church, Malone, TX

Rev. Jeffrey Ahonen

Good Shepherd L.C., Tony, WI; Alpha & Omega Lutheran Mission, Winter, WI; Apologia Lutheran Mission, Deer Park, WI; Peace L.C., Ironwood, MI

Rev. Ernest Bernet

Discipleship L. C., Mineral Wells, TX

Rev. David Carver

St. Paul L. C., Taylorsville, NC

Rev. Jerald Dulas

Sts. Peter & Paul L. C., Simpsonville, SC; All Saints Lutheran Mission, Myrtle Beach, SC; St. Michael & All Angels Lutheran Mission, Martinez, GA

Rev. Douglas Handrich

Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Peoria, IL

Rev. Kent Heimbigner

Charity Lutheran Church, Burleson, TX

Rev. Michael Henson

Trinity Lutheran Church, Herrin, IL; Memphis Lutheran Mission, Lakeland, TN

Rev. Daniel Mensing

Faith Lutheran Church, Beaverton, OR

Rev. Randy Moll

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Rev. Mark Mueller

Redeemer L. C., Cambridge, MN

Rev. John Rutowicz

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Rev. Paul Rydecki

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Las Cruces, NM; Sts. Peter & Paul Lutheran Mission, Silver City, NM

Rev. Josiah Scheck

Christ Lutheran Church, Richmond, MO

Rev. Eric Stefanski

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Harrison, AR; Emmanuel Lutheran Mission, Conway, AR

Rev. Joshua Sullivan

Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Kerrville, TX; Faith Lutheran Mission, Leander, TX

Rev. Timothy Tolar

St. Luke Lutheran Church, Kenai, AK; Homer Lutheran Mission, Homer, AK

Rev. Brandon Warr

St. Patrick Lutheran Church, Chipley, FL

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Trinity Lutheran Church, Herrin, IL

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St. Mary's Lutheran Church
Navotas City, Philippines

Rev. Carlos Marin

Iglesia Confesional de Colombia
Medellin, Colombia

**IGLESIA LUTERANA MISIONERA DE
TARAPOTO-PERÚ**

Tarapoto, Perú

THE LUTHERAN HERALD



NOVEMBER 29, 2021–JANUARY 1, 2022

**A PUBLICATION OF
THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN DIOCESE OF
NORTH AMERICA**

The Calendar

November 28	Advent 1	TLH 95
November 30 (T)	St. Andrew, Apostle	TLH 270
December 5	Advent 2	TLH 611
December 12	Advent 3	ELH 167
(printed at the end of this issue)		
December 13 (M)	St. Lucy, Martyr	
December 15 (W)	Wednesday of Ember Week in Advent	
December 17 (F)	Friday of Ember Week in Advent	
December 18 (Sa)	Saturday of Ember Week in Advent	
December 19	Advent 4	TLH 58
December 21 (T)	St. Thomas, Apostle	
December 25 (Sa)	Feast of the Nativity of our Lord	ELH 184
December 26	S. after Christmas	TLH 112
	(also: Festival of St. Stephen, Martyr)	
December 27 (M)	Festival of St. John, Apostle	TLH 271
December 28 (T)	Festival of the Holy Innocents	TLH 273

ST. IGNATIUS LUTHERAN SEMINARY—The Winter Quarter begins on **November 29**. The Christmas Break begins after classes on Friday, December 17. The classes will be as follows:

E009—Greek Readings 2 (1 hr.)	E003—Psalms (2 hrs.)
H003—Medieval Church (3 hrs.)	H009—Readings in Medieval
P002—Catechetics (3 hrs.)	Theology (1 hr.)

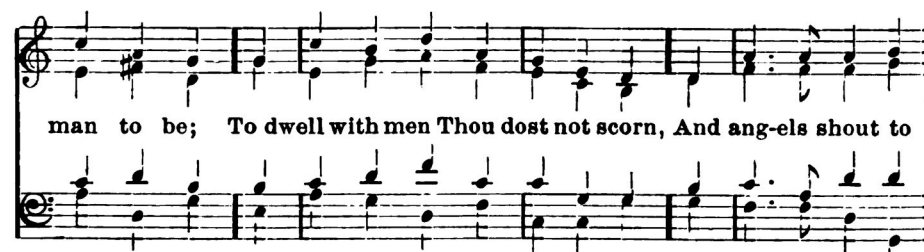
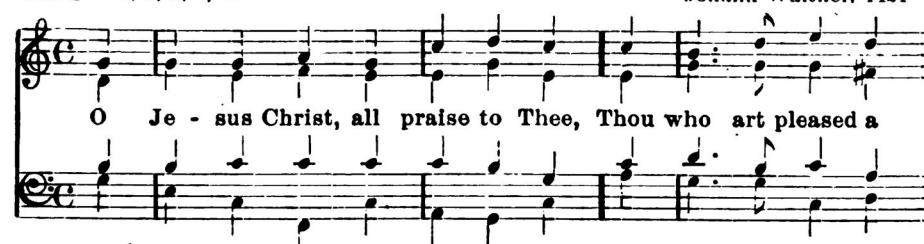
DIOCESAN YOUTUBE CHANNEL—There is now an official diocesan YouTube channel. Currently, the content consists primarily of several of the seminary Matins services, the diocesan documentary on the Justification: “Justification Made Clear,” which Pr. Carver created for the diocese several years ago; and presentations from the most recent colloquium. The plan is to steadily add content, including more presentations from past colloquia. Please subscribe to the channel and share videos with those whom you believe would benefit from them. If you search YouTube for “the ELDoNA,” the diocesan channel should be the first option which appears. Thank you!

Christmas

184

8, 8, 8, 8, 4.

Johann Walther, 1424



2 The eternal Father's only Son
Now takes a manger for His throne:
The everlasting fount of good,
Assumes our mortal flesh and blood.
Hallelujah.

3 He whom the world can not enclose
In Mary's bosom doth repose;
To be a little child He deigns
Who all things by Himself sustains.
Hallelujah.

4 The eternal Light to us descends,
Its brightness to the earth it lends,
And purely shines upon our night,
To make us children of the light.
Hallelujah.

5 The only Son, true God confessed,
To His own world now comes a Guest;
And through this vale of tears our
Guide,
Doth in His heaven our home provide.
Hallelujah.

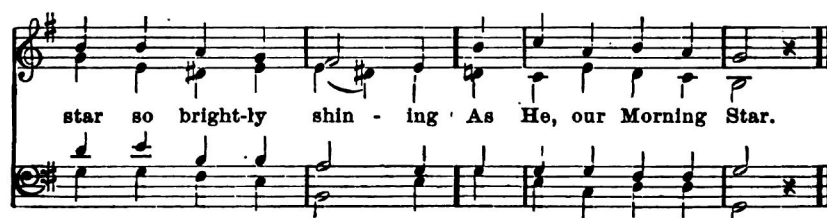
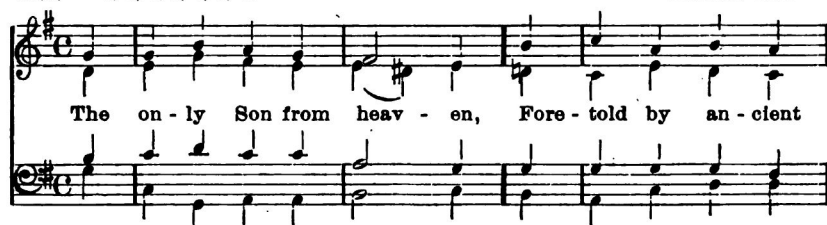
6 In poorest guise to us He came,
Himself He bears our sin and shame,
That, as His heirs in heaven above,
We may with angels share His love.
Hallelujah.

7 His love to show, surpassing thought:
God's Son this wondrous work hath
wrought;
Then let us all unite to raise
Our song of glad, unceasing praise.
Hallelujah.

Third Sunday in Advent

167 7, 6, 7, 6, 7, 7, 6.

German, 1524



2 O time of God appointed,
O bright and holy morn!
He comes, the King anointed,
The Christ, the virgin-born;
His home on earth He maketh,
And man of heaven partaketh,
Of life again an heir.

3 O Lord, our hearts awaken,
To know and love Thee more,
In faith to stand unshaken,
In Spirit to adore,
That we still heavenward hasting,
Yet here Thy joy foretasting,
May reap its fulness there.

Elisabeth Cruciger, 1534

Lesson from the Book of Concord First Sunday in Advent

Article VI.

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

—The Augsburg Confession

Part III, Article IV. Of the Gospel

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

—The Smalcald Articles

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

In his desire to comfort Israel at the destruction of Jerusalem, the Prophet Jeremiah announces that God is going to perform that “good thing” (Hebrew: “good word”) which He had promised. That good word is none other than the Gospel, the good news. The Lord is going to fulfill His promise to send the Messiah. Jeremiah calls the Messiah “a Branch of righteousness,” because Jesus will impute His righteousness to believers. He will credit his righteousness to our account. Our works do not count for our righteousness. “THE LORD (is) OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.” Neither the outward “good” works of unbelievers, nor the genuine good works of believers, proceeding from faith, make us righteous. Only Jesus’ righteousness saves us, so that we dwell in safety.

Verses 17 and 18 describe the coming of the Messiah as the restoration of the Monarchy and the Priesthood. You can understand why some Jews thought there might be two different people. When those days do come, Jesus does Jeremiah’s prophecy one better. He is both king, priest, and prophet! Jesus, the righteous and good Word, is all of those, plus He is the divine Son of God. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

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

The power and wisdom of God is beyond us creatures. He reveals to us what He wants us to know. And He wants us to know that we are saved by His grace, through faith in the work of the eternal Son! The careful work of faithful theologians is not to “figure out” things that God hasn’t told us. It is to teach us and remind us to be careful about what we do and do not say about God’s holy revelation.

St. Paul’s words in Ephesians can be difficult for people to understand, and others may be tempted to over-explain them at the risk of teaching falsely. But regardless of one’s level of understanding, the Gospel of Christ is clear. The truth of our salvation through faith in His holy death and resurrection is clear. God’s promises about His blessings and eternal life for us in Jesus is clear. “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

In the name of Jesus Christ we are sons and daughters of God’s kingdom. We are adopted by the eternal Lord. We didn’t earn it with our powers, nor did we figure it out by our reasoning. We were brought into the kingdom like eight-day-old sons were brought into the Church of the Old Testament at circumcision, and like young children of any age are brought into the New Testament Church through Baptism!

Prayer: O Lord God, who for our sakes hast made Thy blessed Son, our Savior, subject to the Law and caused Him to endure the circumcision of the flesh, grant us the true circumcision of the Spirit that our hearts may be pure from all sinful desires and lusts; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

The Advent season before Christmas emphasizes some of the themes that characterized the Old Testament. The Law defined the theme of man's need for repentance and discipline. God's people are reminded of our humble state as poor, miserable sinners in need of help, who have also been taught order and faithful observances by the Word. But we also have the theme of God's promises, which shape our anticipation and zeal for faithful preparation. Both the Old Testament and the Advent season are focused on their fulfillment in Christmas!

Our Lord's Nativity is also important to the things that come after that glorious event. If the Word were not made flesh, then there wouldn't have been His public ministry. There wouldn't have been His Baptism, or the commands He gave to the Apostolic Ministry to continue baptizing the people into Him. There wouldn't have been the crucifixion, or the resurrection. We would still be waiting, watching, learning, and hoping.

But we have the glorious blessing now to be able to enjoy the Gospel of our crucified and risen Lord. We have received the gift of His birth, after so many others had to wait for it. That does not make us better than they were. Like Paul's point about the Jews, Greeks, slaves, freemen, men, and women; those who were in the true faith before Christ came are one with us in Him, equal concerning our salvation. But nonetheless, we are still very blessed to be able to point to the clear cross of Jesus as the fulfillment of our salvation!

Prayer: Almighty and everlasting God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the name of Thy beloved Son we may be made to abound in good works; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

Each of the Ten Commandments includes both what we are to do and not do. For example, if you fail to help and support your neighbor in his body, you have committed a sin of omission. If you hurt or harm (even murder) his body, you have committed a sin of commission against the Fifth Commandment.

In Colossians we see that our Savior's work of redemption includes both a negative and a positive. He has delivered us from the power of darkness. That negative power of sin had "alienated" you from Him, so that you were "enemies in your mind by wicked works." Jesus removed that negative by His suffering and death that we might be reconciled.

Christ has also "conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love." Positively, we have been granted entrance into the kingdom. Yet, we need to remember that the kingdom is not so much a place, as it is the status of being a member of Christ's Church. How does the kingdom of God come to us? It comes when we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives, here in time and there in eternity. It comes within us by faith in Christ, so "that in all things He may have the preeminence." As a minister, St. Paul's prayer for the Colossians is that these Christians, who are saved from the negative afflictions of sin and bestowed with the positive blessings, would "continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast."

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

Believers in Jesus Christ have a boldness which comes from faith alone. All other religions teach a righteousness which is achieved by doing “righteous” works. Even though the sinful nature clings to all men, the Christian has confidence before God because he knows that his righteousness has been given to him. It is an external righteousness achieved by the righteous suffering and death of Jesus. In fact, being declared righteous by faith alone is the only way to be saved. It is “a new and living way which He [God] consecrated for us.”

Luther was right when He said that the unbeliever cannot come to Jesus by his own reason or strength. However, with the boldness and confidence that comes from faith, the believer can and does come to Him, for the Holy Spirit has called, gathered, and enlightened him with the whole Christian Church on earth. Therefore, St. Paul exhorts us in his letters to come to God and offer Him our heart, mouth, and hand. “Let us draw near with a true heart.” “Let us hold fast the confession” which comes from our lips. “And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works,” which are the works of our hands for the benefit of others—including church attendance. Without faith in Christ, all of this would be impossible; but with Christ we do seek to please Him.

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

The book of Hebrews reflects the theology of St. John’s gospel account. The Son of God is the incarnate Word of the Father. The creation of the world and of mankind is connected to the power of the Son. The Word Himself came to us as true man in the world in order to purge our sins and give us everlasting life.

This message has not changed throughout the centuries and generations. Soon after man fell into sin and death, God promised to defeat Satan and save us. That was His Word after all things were created, and that is the same Word that was fulfilled in His Nativity and continues to be proclaimed in His Church.

This work of God and the message of His Gospel is so much more far-reaching and so much more important than the passing games and politics of the sinful world. Our Lord transcends and rules over all things, and from this divine view He has taught us the more important things, like love, mercy, peace, joy, and faithful hope. He intended goodness and righteousness to be the state of the world when He created it. Even though our sin has damaged the world, His grace and His glory are shown to us so that we can still focus on things above in this life. In Him we live and walk in the Word of His Gospel so that we can enjoy some of His holy blessings now, even as we look forward to the fullness of His glory in the world to come.

Prayer: Almighty and everlasting God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the name of Thy beloved Son we may be made to abound in good works; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

One of the important lessons of the Christmas season is the transition of the Church from that of the Old Testament to the New Testament. This does not mean the Old Testament was bad, nor is it obsolete. It was about holy, divine promises. The people of Israel were characterized by God's promises to give them a kingdom and a land. Their kingdom came in Jesus Christ, and their true Holy Land is clearly identified as the resurrection and the life of the world to come. They were to wait faithfully for these, as Simeon did. And when the Son of God came in flesh and blood at His Nativity, God's promises from the Old Testament were being fulfilled, and Simeon also faithfully rejoiced in seeing it, as Israel should have!

Our Savior would continue to fulfill the things that God had foretold in the Scriptures of Moses and the Prophets, and the light of salvation in Jesus Christ would grow brighter and brighter as it was shown to the Gentiles and all nations. The New Testament would be characterized by the Gospel of Christ crucified, proclaimed before the face of all peoples. The work of God through His chosen people would expand beyond Moses, beyond the temple in Jerusalem, beyond the people of Israel, and be focused in His holy, catholic Church. The Church of the New Testament proclaims the whole counsel of God; Old and New Testaments, Law and Gospel, Word and Sacrament, forgiveness and life everlasting!

Prayer: Almighty and everlasting God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the name of Thy beloved Son we may be made to abound in good works; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

It is the return of the seventy which prompts Jesus to give thanks to the heavenly Father. The disciples had experienced a mixed response from those they visited. On the one hand, the disciples rejoiced that “even the demons are subject to us in Your name” (Luke 10:17). On the other hand, some cities did not receive them, so that they shook the dust off their sandals against them. Jesus upbraids those cities with pronouncements of woe (Matthew 11:20-24).

Jesus and His heavenly Father are in complete agreement. Salvation is to come through faith in His only Son, Jesus Christ. The preached Word has revealed salvation through the Word to the babes, and they came to faith and were saved. The same preached Word spoke of salvation

through faith in Jesus, but the self-righteously “wise and prudent” rejected it, because they proudly considered themselves sufficient without Jesus. In this way, the one and the same Gospel has both hidden and revealed salvation.

The Father wants all to be saved through Jesus. Jesus continues to invite all saying, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Each one must learn from Jesus to confess his sins and take up Jesus' easy yoke. The yoke of keeping the Law in order to be saved is so heavy it will break you. Jesus' yoke is the exact opposite; His yoke rests the souls of its hearers by giving salvation freely.

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

The Pharisees are motivated by their formal principle that entrance into the kingdom is achieved by works. If you did good works, then God would save you and bless you. If you were receiving material blessings in this life, then God was pleased with your good works. If you were suffering, then you must have done something wrong and need to shape up. They even held that if all the inhabitants of Jerusalem would only keep the Sabbath perfectly, then the Messiah and His kingdom would return.

Jesus teaches them that the kingdom of God cannot be externally observed with visible and tangible works. First the Son of Man “must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation” in order to provide the price of atonement. Second, the message must be proclaimed to create faith which admits into the kingdom of God. When Jesus says, “The kingdom of God is within you,” He is teaching that His kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, consisting of all who have faith within them. Christ’s formal principle is that men are saved by faith in Jesus Christ.

It’s not that external good works are forbidden. It’s just that they are the fruit of faith. God’s kingdom comes when we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity. The Pharisees were imitating the works, but denying the faith. And thus, the kingdom did not come to them by their careful observation of the Law without faith.

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

Historical accounts show Herod was a wicked, spiteful, self-important ruler. These children were not guilty of any crime against this ruler or the civil order, but in his petty hatred and cowardice he had them killed. They were killed because evil people thought they could protect their sense of power and control, even as such wicked men thought they could overcome God and His will.

Herod heard the Word of God about the Christ, but He didn’t care. The Word of God also says to our society, “You shall not murder,” yet selfish people still kill children in their rebellion against God. Spiteful cowards still are murderers as they hate their brothers (1 John 3:15). We all hear the Word of God, but sin makes us act as if we don’t care either.

God cannot be defeated by the efforts of men. His will shall be accomplished, just as Christ was saved from Herod. Our Savior still returned to the land of His people and was lifted up as their King, even if it was on the holy cross. Herod died and faced judgment, and he is remembered only as a horrible man. The children who were murdered are remembered as martyrs who died on account of God’s Word. The whole story reminds us that the power of vain men is not greater than God’s power; and those who seem helpless are not entirely helpless, because God is merciful and almighty. The Gospel of Christ our King is the help and life of all who are humble and faithful in Him.

Prayer: O God, whose praise the martyred Innocents confessed, not by speaking, but by dying: destroy in us all wickedness, that our life may proclaim the faith in word and deed, through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

From Moses to the prophets, on to the Apostles, God has given us His Words and wisdom so that we may know His holy will for us. The Law, in all its various applications, was given so that we may know what true righteousness looks like. The ceremonial laws show us what righteous worship looks like. His examples of civil laws show us how a righteous society maintains good order. And the moral law shows us that we have no righteousness apart from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The people of Israel had strayed and abused God's Law. The Pharisees represented the false doctrine that had thoroughly grasped the hearts of the people. They thought their righteousness could come from themselves. Even before our Savior came in flesh and blood, the ceremonial laws could only point forward to God's work which would fulfill His own promises. Circumcision, purification, and sacrifices only showed a preview of the greater work of the Lord that would come later in His Son.

Mary and Joseph were blessed with faith from God. They heard and believed that He would do wondrous things through the Child in their care. Later, St. John and the other Apostles and Evangelists would also be blessed with the faith and diligence to bring forth the wondrous Word and teaching of Christ. By this holy Gospel, all who hear and believe may know the true Word of God which gives us everlasting life in all that Jesus did for us.

Prayer: Merciful Lord, we beseech Thee to cast the bright beams of Thy light upon Thy Church that it, being instructed by the doctrines of Thy blessed Apostle and Evangelist Saint John, may attain to the light of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

The Gospel of Christ is the good news that we are saved not by works, but by the life and death of Jesus, who forgives us our sins and declares us righteous through faith alone. The nature of the Gospel is that it is the power of God. The Greek word for "power" is *dynamis*, from which we get the word "dynamite". God is powerfully working through the Gospel message. He destroys our hard-hearted, sinful pride so that He can save us. The Gospel makes hearers into believers!

The content of the Gospel is the righteousness of God. This righteousness is not the "righteous" works which we have attempted to do. If it were our righteous deeds, then salvation would be from "works to works." Instead, God's righteousness is the perfectly righteous life and death of Jesus. The righteous life of His Son is revealed to us through the Gospel message. The content—Jesus' righteousness—is "from faith to faith."

The attribute of the Gospel is that, like St. Paul, we are "not ashamed of the Gospel." To put that phrase positively, due to the Gospel, I boast "in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Galatians 6:14). The blessed result of the Gospel is to save all who believe. The Gospel is the one and only God-appointed means by which men are saved. In those same believers the Holy Spirit gives a new heart, so that "the just shall live by faith."

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

Lesson from the Book of Concord Second Sunday in Advent

Article XVII.

Also, they [the Lutherans] teach, that, at the Consummation of the World, Christ shall appear for judgment, and shall raise up all the dead; He shall give to the godly and elect eternal life and everlasting joys, but ungodly men and the devils He shall condemn to be tormented without end.

They condemn the Anabaptists who think that there will be an end to the punishments of condemned men and devils. They condemn also others, who are now spreading certain Jewish opinions that, before the resurrection of the dead, the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed [exterminated].

—The Augsburg Confession

Lesson from the Book of Concord Sunday after ChristMass

Chapter XIII.

In the town of Eisenach in Thuringia there was, to our knowledge, a monk, John Hilten, who thirty years ago was cast by his fraternity into prison, because he had protested against certain most notorious abuses. For we have seen his writings, from which it can be well understood what the nature of his doctrine was. And those who knew him testify that he was a mild old man, and serious indeed, but without moroseness. He predicted many things, some of which have thus far transpired, and others still seem to impend, which we do not wish to recite, lest it may be inferred that they are narrated either from hatred toward one or from partiality to another. But finally when, either on account of his age or the foulness of the prison, he fell into disease, he sent for the guardian, in order to tell him of his sickness; and when the guardian, inflamed with pharisaic hatred, had begun to reprove the man harshly on account of his kind of doctrine which seemed to be injurious to the kitchen; then, passing by the mention of his sickness, he said with a sigh that he had borne these injuries patiently for Christ's sake, since he had indeed neither written nor taught anything which could overthrow the position of the monks, but had only protested against some well-known abuses. "But another one," he said, "will come in A.D. 1516, who will destroy you, neither will you be able to resist him." This very opinion concerning the downward career of the power of the monks, and this number of years, his friends afterwards found also written by him in his Commentaries, which he had left, concerning certain passages of Daniel. But although the issue will teach how much weight should be given to this declaration, yet there are other signs which threaten a change in the power of the monks, that are no less certain than oracles. For it is evident how much hypocrisy, ambition, avarice there is in the monasteries, how much ignorance and cruelty among all the unlearned, what vanity in their sermons and in devising continually new means of gaining money. And there are other faults, which we do not care about mentioning. Although they once were schools for Christian instruction, now they have degenerated as though from a golden age to an iron age, as the Platonic cube degenerates into bad harmonies, which Plato says brings destruction. All the most wealthy monasteries support only an idle crowd, which gluttonizes upon the public alms of the Church. Christ, however, teaches concerning the salt that has lost its savor, that it should be cast out and be trodden under foot (Matt. 5:13). Wherefore the monks by such morals singing their own fate [requiem]. And now another sign is added, because they are, in many places, the instigators of the death of good men. These murders God undoubtedly will shortly avenge. ...

—Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Art. XXVII, §1–7

The shepherds could have stayed out in their fields. The angel didn't command them to go searching for the Savior who was Christ the Lord; he simply told them how to find Him. Their Lord would be the Baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. (Of course! Where else would one find the Creator of all?)

But the shepherds were excited to see the Child, so they hurried to find Him, and find Him they did. And their excitement didn't subside. On the contrary, it grew when they saw the confirmation of the angel's message and as they began to ponder, along with Mary, what it meant that the Christ had finally come, and the way in which He had come. It changed nothing, and yet, it changed everything. They would return to their flocks and go on with their lives. However, they would do it with the knowledge that God had come to earth; that He had kept His promises to Israel; that He was so zealous for their salvation that He would submit to wearing diapers and lying where animals fed.

How would His birth change the world? You've seen how. It's at once tragic and glorious. How will the coming of Christ continue to affect the world in these last days? Only God knows. But like the shepherds, you know that He loves you and that He keeps His promises. So rejoice today in the birth of your Lord!

Prayer: 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 livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

There is certainly judgment enough to go around. It is so tempting to look at this sin-sick world, cluck our tongues, and feel comfortable with our own righteousness. But here St. Paul, through the Holy Spirit, reminds us that we, too, all practiced the sins that we judge. Of course we do not excuse such sins by recognizing that we once practiced them. Ignorance of the Law is not an excuse for not following it! But even ignorance is not much of an excuse, for all people have a conscience, and they know there is right and wrong, even if they do not always listen to their consciences.

Rather, we still need to remind ourselves, and each other, that our only plea before God's righteous judgment is the innocent, shed blood of the God-Man, Jesus Christ. He alone could pay the price of redemption that our rebellion demanded—and that cost was His life and death. But He rose again in glory to show his victory over death and the grave, and we look forward to His return! Through faith we strive to do better—not because we are striving to earn God's favor, but in thanks to Him for His great mercy.

Prayer: 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 the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Have you ever waited a lifetime to hear something? How about two lifetimes? How about close to four thousand years? All mankind had been waiting since the expulsion from the Garden of Eden to hear that the Seed of the Woman was going to be born. Many believed in this promise and trusted in God's plan of redemption. And when that promise was given, or repeated, or clarified, many scoffed, as Ahaz did, when Isaiah prophesied of Immanuel--"God With Us"--who would be born of a virgin. God performed a miracle to give Isaac to Abraham and Sarah when they were well beyond childbearing years. God wanted us to know that He could, and would, and did, bring His Son into the world through the miracle of the virgin birth.

In our devotional reading for today we see that blessed virgin's response. She only mentioned in passing that it was not normally possible for her to bear a child, as she had not known a man. But when Gabriel says that this will be a divine miracle, she immediately confesses her faith and submits to God's will: "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." May we all be found to have such trust in our God's gracious promises!

Prayer: 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 the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

The events surrounding the birth of Christ are the culmination of 4,000 years of God's steering human history to accomplish this miracle of miracles. Caesar Augustus didn't know God's purpose behind the census he decreed. Neither did Mary and Joseph, for that matter. But behind the scenes, God was preparing the way for His Son to be born in Bethlehem, as foretold by the prophet Micah.

The inn in Bethlehem didn't fill up with people in order to spite the holy family; they had their own reasons for coming. And the manger wasn't constructed to be the cradle of Mary's Son. But behind the scenes, God was preparing the way for the most humble and memorable circumstances of Jesus' birth. The shepherds in the fields weren't out in their fields waiting for the angels to come; they were simply doing their job. But behind the scenes, God was preparing the way for the angels to have a ready audience for their momentous announcement: "There is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

If the Lord was behind all those events, imagine how great His love is for you. He has brought together the events of history for you to hear His Gospel, to be baptized in His name, and to be celebrating once again the birth of your Savior. Glory to God in the highest!

Prayer: 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 livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Mary was about three months pregnant when she got back to Nazareth, after spending three months in Judea with her relative Elizabeth. The details of the discussions at that time between Mary and Joseph are left out of Holy Scripture, so we do well not to imagine too much about them. It is enough for us to know that Joseph was a righteous man who, even though he had the right to divorce his seemingly unfaithful betrothed wife, wanted to spare her from public shame. But the Lord blessedly didn't force Joseph to take Mary at her word about her own innocence. He sent His angel to reveal the Child's divine origins, and also to reveal the divinely appointed name and mission of this child: Jesus, Savior, not to save people from earthly poverty, or from social inequities, or from oppressive governments, or from boredom, but to "save His people from their sins."

Look to the virgin's Son for that, for salvation from your sins. It is the very reason He was born, so that God might be with us as one of us, to earn for us the forgiveness of sins by His righteous life and by His innocent death in our place. Our God chose to dwell with us for a time, so that we might dwell with Him for eternity. Our God chose to dwell with us in humility, so that we might dwell with Him in glory.

Prayer: 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 livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Sometimes the world and its future look very bleak. We see corruption growing in the affairs of government, even corruption and evil among those who claim to serve God in His church! So we have to remind ourselves that the world we see will someday pass away, consumed in God's judgment that will occur when Jesus Christ returns in glory to judge the living and the dead. And while we await His glorious return, will things get better for us, or will they get worse? Here, Paul warns Timothy that they will certainly get worse.

But what are we to use as a guide while we wait? Are the words and mutual encouragement of fellow believers enough? Are they our source of strength and comfort? Certainly, the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren is good and healthy, and we encourage it. But the source of our doctrine and practice is, and must remain, the inspired Words of Holy Scripture itself, preserved for us through these thousands of years, from Moses to the apostle John. The Words of Scripture alone, in contrast to the human wisdom of history or science, are able to make us "wise for salvation." Scripture alone teaches us what we really need to know.

Prayer: 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 the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

What does it take for us to be satisfied? Would we rather have more earthly goods, or knowledge, or glory? Or are we focused on growing closer to the God who sent His Son to pay the ransom for our sins?

St. Peter here encourages us to pursue virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and brotherly love. Where and how are we to pursue these things? We find these through His promises! His promises can be found in Scripture, where we learn of God's great mercy and capacity to forgive. If we are satisfied, we are short-sighted—maybe even blind! Maybe, if we are satisfied, we are thinking too little of the sinful condition that God has rescued us from, claiming us as His own. He calls to us in Word and Sacrament, teaching us and sustaining our faith in Him through the work of the Holy Spirit. Are we weak? Sometimes we stumble and fall into sin. Are we ignorant? There is always more for us to learn of God and His Word. Are we intemperate or impatient? God will teach us discipline and patience. Do we find ourselves cold and unfeeling towards our neighbors? God's Word will give us the strength and will to serve Him, and each other. May we always flee for refuge in our weakness to His Word, and always be eager to learn and do more to serve Him.

Prayer: 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 the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

The contrast between God's wisdom and the world's wisdom couldn't be more obvious than it is this week leading up to Christmas. The world, in its wisdom, is immersed in last minute shopping, decorating, planning, and partying. The world is desperately seeking merriment, fulfillment, and acceptance. If it finds those things at all, it is fleeting. Meanwhile, the world in its wisdom continues to fret over a virus, trusting in "science" and "experts" to extend their earthly lives just a little bit longer, with no hope at all beyond this world and no fear at all of this world's Judge.

Then there is God's wisdom, which is revealed in the Gospel. It was revealed in small, prophetic, even cryptic sayings in the Old Testament, so that the details of it remained a great mystery. But that mystery of God's wisdom has now been revealed, centering in the incarnation, birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son of God, all of which was necessary if we poor sinners were to be saved.

Through the Gospel, Christians have come to know and to agree with God's wisdom, that it is truly wise and awesome and surprising and good. And so this week, we who have been given the gift of knowing God's wisdom are preparing with great joy to celebrate the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ, which is one of those great, mysterious things that God has "prepared for those who love Him."

Prayer: 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 livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

In the 6,000-or-so-year history of the world, very few people have ever seen God, and even that was only a brief glimpse. But from the time the virgin Mary felt the first movement in her womb, mankind was given the singular privilege, for about 34 years, of seeing God, hearing God, touching God, and being touched by God. Light was born into the world on Christmas, and those who encountered Jesus at any point during His earthly life encountered the Light. Some special few, like Mary and Joseph, Jesus' brothers, and later Jesus' apostles, got to spend years of their life in His presence, whether or not they recognized or appreciated it.

The good news for us who do not live in that special era is that we are at no disadvantage at all. As St. John reminds us, we who have received the teaching of the apostles have the very same fellowship with God as they did, have the same Light as they did, have the same cleansing blood applied to us as they did. That is, we have it as long as we walk in the light, as long as we retain the knowledge of Christ and faith in Christ. We have the word of the Word, and that is, amazingly, just as good. Let us hold onto it steadfastly, and let us be careful always to walk according to it, in repentance, in faith, and in love, that our joy may be full.

Prayer: 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 livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Paul has many instructions on what to pray for, and how. In this case, he tells the Thessalonians to “pray for us,” for him and his missionary companions, that the Word of God may run swiftly and be glorified. May God's Word run swiftly and be glorified also among us!

Secondarily, Paul wants them to pray that he and his companions be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men. Of course, we know that even when Paul was in chains, the Gospel itself was not in chains (2 Timothy 2:9). Although the consequences of his ministry would lead to his imprisonment, trial, and martyrdom, Paul still expresses confidence that the Thessalonians both were doing, and would continue to do, the things that he was telling them to do.

When we face physical danger or risk may we also find it in ourselves, with God's help, to think of others before ourselves. May we always pray for God's Word to run freely, despite the chains the world would throw upon it. Lord, help us to trust that You are our Creator, and that the world only continues because You allow it to. Remind us that Your Son will come again soon, to judge the living and the dead, and make us faithfully await that day as a bride-to-be awaits her wedding day.

Prayer: 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 the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Some people look at the wars, famines, earthquakes, and other troubles of this world and try to determine when the end of the world will come. And yet Jesus himself said that only the Father knows the day and hour of the end of the world. It is not for us to know exactly when the world is going to end.

It is our part to be ready for the end of the world—for we may be called upon to testify to our faith before the kings and rulers of this world. Even families will be divided, with parents and children turning upon each other, knowing that it may lead to capital punishment. If such things befall us, will our God abandon us? Will He leave us to our own devices as we speak before the world? No! He has promised us the Holy Spirit, who will help us to speak before the world. The Holy Spirit helps us in so many ways already. He helps us to pray (Romans 8:26); He is the Comforter that Jesus promised He would send after He ascended to the right hand of the Father (John 16:7). If we are called to testify of our faith in public, Jesus promises the help of the Holy Spirit to testify of our faith, as He did for Stephen and all the holy martyrs of our faith.

Prayer: 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 the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

In yesterday's Gospel (John 1:19-28), John the Baptist proclaimed that the Christ had finally arrived. In today's reading, the same John the Baptist, still in his mother's womb, proclaimed the same thing with his leap for joy. Elizabeth proclaimed it, too, as both she and her child were filled with the Holy Spirit. They both rejoiced to be in the presence of the Word who was so recently made flesh in the womb of the virgin Mary.

Mary rejoiced, too, and sang that Spirit-inspired song that Christians have been singing ever since St. Luke recorded the words for us. Her song teaches us to rejoice for all the right reasons: (1) Because God shows grace and goodness to the humble and lowly, urging us to reject pride and arrogance and to humble ourselves before God and man. (2) Because God Himself will bring down the powerful who oppress His people, urging us to wait patiently for His help, in His time. (3) Because God shows mercy and kindness to all who fear Him, urging us to fear Him and to expect good things from Him. And (4) because God is faithful and keeps His promises, urging us to learn what He has promised and to trust in Him firmly, no matter what is going on in the world around us. Let us rejoice, then, for all these reasons, which are both wrapped up and revealed in the Advent of Christ.

Prayer: 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 livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord Fourth Sunday in Advent

Article IX.

Of Baptism, they [the Lutherans] teach, that it is necessary to salvation, and that through Baptism is offered the grace of God; and that children are to be baptized, who, being offered to God through Baptism, and received into His grace.

They condemn the Anabaptists, who allow not the Baptism of children, and say that children are saved without Baptism.

—The Augsburg Confession

V. Of Baptism.

Baptism is nothing else than the Word of God [with mersion] in the water, commanded by His institution, or as Paul says: “A washing in the Word”; just as Augustine also says: “The Word comes to the element, and it becomes a sacrament.” Therefore, we do not hold with Thomas and the monastic preachers or Dominicans, who forget the Word (God’s institution) and say that God has imparted to the water a spiritual power which, through the water, washes away sin. Nor do we agree with Scotus and the Barefooted monks [Minorites or Franciscan monks], who teach that, by the assistance of the divine will, baptism washes away sins, and that this ablution occurs only through the will of God, and by no means through the Word and water.

Of the baptism of children, we hold that children ought to be baptized. For they belong to the promised redemption made through Christ, and the Church should administer it to them.

—The Smalcald Articles, Part III.

Lesson from the Book of Concord Third Sunday in Advent

Article V.

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

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

—The Augsburg Confession

Article XVI.

Of Political Order.

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

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

The Gospel lection appointed for this Festival Day teaches the Church concerning the judgment which is to come at the end of the age, likening it to the way in which there is a division between that which is of value, and that which is not, in the midst of this fallen world. The prudence of the faithful is certainly seen in the discernment of the one who is prepared to commit all that they have because of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price. There is a singleminded prioritization which is at the root of such decisions: the person who makes such a choice has firm faith as to where true worth may be found.

St. Lucy was martyred while still a young woman because of such commitment to the hidden treasure. Having her faith in the Christ, she was not ashamed to lose her possessions, her eyes, or even her life. In her age—and ours—the young are often told that they have “so much to live for,” but St. Lucy knew that what was given to her by grace through faith in Christ Jesus exceeded any of the imagined wealth the world might offer. Baptized into the Christ, she was made a partaker of the resurrection of our Lord, and knew that this salvation is worth more than all the world.

Prayer: O God, our Savior, hear us, we pray Thee, as we rejoice in the steadfast devotion Thou dost kindle and sustain in the hearts of Thy saints, through our Lord, Jesus Christ, who livest and reignest with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end. Amen.

Holy Scripture does not support the notion that John was one who, year after year, wandered in the wilderness and proclaimed the Word. Instead, Holy Scripture places the beginning of St. John’s ministry in a historical context: “Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.” Secular historians place the beginning of the reign of Tiberius Caesar in September of A.D. 14; it would appear, then, that by that reckoning, St. John’s ministry began sometime in late A.D. 29.

St. Luke records concerning our Lord: “Jesus Himself began His ministry at about thirty years of age” (Luke 3:23). While secular histories are notoriously flawed, but the key thing is that we understand that John “went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” for a relatively brief time before Jesus came to him for Baptism. John’s ministry took place at a time which coincided with events in the secular realm; Pontius Pilate, Herod, Annas, and Caiaphas are in position to fulfill their roles in history in connection with the coming of the Christ. Secular history must serve sacred history. This world comes to its end, but the Day of the saints of God endures forever.

Prayer: O God, who seest that we are afflicted because of our iniquity, mercifully grant that we may be comforted by Thy visitation, Who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end. Amen.

Yesterday's lection from John 1 instructs the Church concerning the testimony of St. John at our Lord's Baptism. Today's lection teaches us concerning the first time when the forerunner and the Christ met, and the words of St. Elizabeth at the time of that meeting.

St. Luke makes it clear that St. Elizabeth's words are not merely those of an excited, expectant mother; rather, "Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." Therefore, we have a clear testimony in Holy Scripture to the faith present in even the smallest children: "For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy." Is this a miracle? Of course. Faith is always a miracle which the Holy Spirit works through Word and Sacrament.

The joy of St. John was a response to hearing the greeting of St. Mary, who, in turn, had come to see that which the angel of the Lord had made known to her concerning Elizabeth, her relative.

We should not marvel that our Lord and St. John did not know each other during the intervening years, for our Lord spent years in exile in Egypt, and we know nothing concerning the life of St. John through the decades preceding his ministry. When the time came for St. John to proclaim the Christ, he did so. We rejoice at the revelation of the divine Word.

Prayer: Stir up Thy might, we beseech Thee, O Lord, and come, that they who trust in Thy loving kindness may be the more speedily freed from all adversity, Who livest and reignest, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end. Amen.

Rightly understood, we should not be offended by the protestations of those who were assembled for the circumcision of St. John. St. Luke records, "But they said to her, 'There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name.' So they made signs to his father—what he would have him called."

In an age of atomistic individualism, many people have a 'gut' reaction to support a mother (or father) labeling a child with a name chosen in a momentary fancy. But those who initially protested naming the child "John" were arguing from an understanding that a child lives in relationship to his entire family, and within the Church and civil society. Lacking the knowledge that the Lord had decreed that which Zacharias confirmed ("His name is John"), they were right to emphasize the naming of Zacharias' son in such a way as to affirm his place within Church, State and Home. The giving of the name in connection with circumcision emphasized a boy's place within the Three Estates.

But the Lord had determined a place for His messenger which necessitated a name which broke with the continuity of his family. "His name is John." "And all those who heard them kept them in their hearts, saying, 'What kind of child will this be?' And the hand of the Lord was with him." The circumstances of his naming and circumcision bore witness to the divinely-given vocation which St. John would fulfill.

Prayer: Lord, we beseech Thee, give ear to our prayers, and lighten the darkness of our hearts, by Thy gracious visitation; Who livest and reignest, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end. Amen.

The Gospel appointed for Ember Wednesday in Advent emphasizes the link between the birth of the forerunner and the birth of the Christ. The time for the conception of the Christ is set forth in connection with the conception of St. John, so that the angel who first visited St. Zacharias now came to the Blessed Virgin Mary with the greeting, “Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!”

As the Gospel for an Ember Day within a penitential season, perhaps this lection might surprise us. But why? When we are mindful of the burden of our sins, and our inability to deliver ourselves from death, what we are most needful of is the consolation which is ours in Christ Jesus. Mary’s response to the words of the angel is one born of faith: “Behold the maid-servant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.” Like all the children of God, she is the recipient of the grace of God, and she serves as an example of faithful submission to the Word of the Lord. The saints of God rejoice at the good news of the coming of the Savior, for it is His righteousness that is credited to all who believe.

Prayer: Grant, we beseech Thee, almighty God, that with the coming solemnity of our Lord’s birth to accomplish our redemption, through Thy holy Word and Sacraments Thou would strength our faith in Christ Jesus, who livest and reignest with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end. Amen.

We do not read an account of our Lord’s Baptism in St. John’s Gospel. Instead, we are left to infer that it transpired between the events of verses 27 and 29. In other words, as soon as St. John the Baptist had testified to those who were sent from the Pharisees concerning his divinely-given vocation, the Christ came to him to be baptized. Thus, St. John the Evangelist writes, “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, “After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.” I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water.’”

The timing should not surprise us; the salvation of the world is made known according to the will and word of the Lord. After decades of preparation, and a period of time baptizing the people of Israel for the remission of their sins, the time had come both for the sect of the Pharisees to be rebuked concerning their ignorance of the Christ (“I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know.”) and for John’s humble submission to the Christ. The Pharisees did not know the Christ, for they sought a Christ who was according to their own imagination; St. John did not know the Christ only in the sense that he waited for His identity to be revealed.

Prayer: Lord, we beseech Thee, give ear to our prayers, and lighten the darkness of our hearts, by Thy gracious visitation; Who livest and reignest, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end. Amen.