

**Clergy of the ELDoNA,
affiliated congregations and missions**

Rt. Rev. James Heiser

Salem Lutheran Church, Malone, TX

Rev. Jeffrey Ahonen

Good Shepherd L.C., Tony, WI; Apologia Lutheran Mission, Deer Park, WI; Peace L.C., Ironwood, MI; Pure Blessings Lutheran Church, Brandon, WI

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; St. Bartholomew Lutheran Mission, Fort Myers, FL; St. Luke Evangelical Lutheran Mission, UAC, Ormond Beach, FL

Rev. Douglas Handrich (Emeritus)

Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Peoria, IL

Rev. Kent Heimbigner

Charity Lutheran Church, Burleson, TX

Rev. Benjamin Henson

Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Peoria, IL

Rev. Michael Henson

Trinity Lutheran Church, Herrin, IL

Rev. Martin Jackson

Lamb of God Ev. Lutheran Church, Rogers, AR

Rev. Daniel Mensing

Faith Lutheran Church, Tualatin, OR

Rev. Mark Mueller

Redeemer Lutheran Church, Cambridge, MN

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St. Boniface Lutheran Church, Niles, MI

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

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

Rev. Brandon Warr

St. Patrick Lutheran Church, Chipley, FL

Rev. Dcn. Gary Harroun

Trinity Lutheran Church, Herrin, IL

Rev. Dcn. Jacob Henson

St. Henry Lutheran Mission (WI and MI), especially Apologia Lutheran Mission, Deer Park, WI

Rev. Dcn. Anthony Oncken

Salem Lutheran Church, Malone, TX

Rev. Dcn. Floyd Smithey

Sts. Peter & Paul Lutheran Church, Simpsonville, SC; St. James Lutheran Mission, Knoxville, TN

THE LUTHERAN HERALD



DECEMBER 2, 2024—JANUARY 4, 2025

**A PUBLICATION OF
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The Calendar

The Lutheran Hymnal (1941): TLH; 2022 Supplement: ASBH

(Monday: M; Tuesday: T; Wednesday: W; Thursday: R; Friday: F; Saturday: S)

December 1	Advent 1	ASBH 1
December 8	Advent 2	ASBH 2
December 13 (F)	St. Lucy, Martyr	ASBH 67*
December 15	Advent 3	ASBH 3
December 18 (W)	Wednesday in Ember Week	
December 20 (F)	Friday in Ember Week	
December 21 (S)	Saturday in Ember Week/ Festival of St. Thomas, Apostle	ASBH 69
December 22	Advent 4	ASBH 4
December 23 (M)	St. Thorlak, Bp. & Confessor	ASBH 70
December 24 (T)	Christmas Vigil	
December 25 (W)	Feast of the Holy Nativity	ASBH 5
December 26 (R)	St. Stephen, Martyr	ASBH 71
December 27 (F)	St. John, Apostle and Evangelist	ASBH 72
December 28 (S)	Holy Innocents	ASBH 72**
December 29	Sunday in the Octave of Christmas	ASBH 6

* #67 in ASBH 2022 Supplement; #68 in the Synod workbook.

** #72 in ASBH 2022 Supplement; #73 in the Synod workbook.

A 'new' hymn taken from the Ohio Synod's Evangelical Lutheran Hymnal (1906) is included in this issue: "It is a Time of Joy Today" for use in the Christmas season.

St. Ignatius Lutheran Theological Seminary classes continue

The Winter 2024 Quarter will begin **December 2**. The "Christmas Break" will begin Monday, **December 23**. Winter Quarter will resume on **January 6** (Epiphany) and will continue until Friday, **February 21**. Classes for the Winter Quarter are:

- E000—Greek (3 hrs.)
- S001—Lutheran Confessions 1 (3 hrs.)
- E001—Hermeneutics/Law & Gospel (3 hrs.)
(Liturgics Practicum 1 is being deferred until Summer.)

St. Ignatius currently has two students, Duncan Geldenhuys (Australia) and Jonathan Teo Zin Han (Singapore).

God's seen in flesh, we're re - con - ciled.
The Lord of Life with us doth dwell.
Up - on this great, this won - drous night.
In Him their Sav - ior re - cog - nize. A - men.

5. Now praise the Lord, who'er can praise—
Who, from their low estate to raise
His enemies, from His high throne
Sent down His loved, His only Son.

6. Up! join the angel host and cry,
Now glory be to God most high;
Let peace prevail the world around,
Good-will to men and joy abound.

Season
 ##. It Is A Time of Joy Today

Paul Gerhardt, 1667
 Tr., John Kelly, 1867

Gerhardt
 From "Best's Eighty Chorales"

1. It is a time of joy — to - day,
 2. The Lord who bears our sin — is here,
 3. All foes are put our feet — be - neath,
 4. O! hap - py world, thrice hap - py they,

With mourn - ing and — with woe a - way!
 Who'll bruise the ser - pent's head is near,
 For sin and Sa - tan, hell and death,
 Who on this low - ly In - fant stay

Woe, woe to him — who us — re - viled!
 The death of death — the woe of hell —
 Are brought to shame and put — to flight
 Their souls, and with — be - liev - ing eyes

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.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 2: JEREMIAH 33:14-18 1ST S. IN ADVENT

There is a parallel passage in Jeremiah 23 which also begins, “Behold, the days are coming...” (v. 5). The two prophecies are very similar, but chapter 23 focuses more on the King, and chapter 33 focuses on the kingdom. Jeremiah 23:6 and 33:16 are almost identical, except for a single pronoun. Chapter 23 declares, “this is His name by which He will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness.” But today’s text says, “this is the name by which she will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness.” “He” is the Lord Jesus Christ. “She” is the faithful Church, composed of all believers from the Old and New Testaments. The Christian Church is called “The Lord Our Righteousness” because the Christ has put His name on her and applied His righteousness to her, through His Word and Baptism. His righteous people in the time of the Old Testament and the saints in the Christian Church are one kingdom by the power of His Holy Spirit and faith in the only true Savior, our Lord Jesus.

St. Paul says: “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). This means God sees the faithful as perfect in Christ. Being forgiven does not just mean we get another chance to do the right thing. Forgiveness means that God sees us as perfectly righteous already, because the perfect righteousness of the Christ covers our sins.

Collect: 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.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 4: EPH. 1:3-6 11TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is acknowledged as blessed when people offer Him the praise that He deserves. He deserves praise and honor because He has chosen to redeem mankind from their sins even before He laid the foundations of the world. When people believe and confess this in faith in Him, the Lord God is blessed. If they, however, do not believe this, or reject it, they are rejecting the Lord God and do not bless Him, but curse Him.

These unbelievers curse themselves by cursing Him. They do not receive the adoption as sons by Jesus Christ. If someone believes He has been blessed by the Lord God, but despises the Christ, he is a liar. One cannot reject the Anointed One and be blessed by the Lord God. But all those who do cling to the Lord Jesus in faith have been adopted as sons through Jesus Christ to the heavenly Father, according to the pleasure of His good will.

We therefore enjoy all the spiritual blessings that our God and Father would bestow upon us. We are blessed when He gifts us with forgiveness, life, and salvation. We are blessed when He brings us into His Church to receive His Word and Sacraments. Through these means the Holy Ghost gifts us with faith in the Christ, so that we may obtain life everlasting, and be called by Him “My beloved.”

Collect: 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, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

St. Paul writes to the churches in Galatia that the Law was given to be our tutor. It serves to show us our sin. It serves to prevent gross outbursts of sinful behavior in those who are guarded by the Law. It serves to guide us in what is pleasing to the Lord God, and what is not. In this way, St. Paul says it was meant to bring us to Christ. For having learned from the Law what poor, miserable sinners we are, we look for a Savior to redeem us from the penalty of breaking the Law.

When Jesus revealed Himself in our flesh at His birth, He is revealed as the source—the only source—of our salvation. The Son of God bearing our flesh would perfectly fulfill the Law of God because we are unable. The punishment that we deserve on account of our manifold sins and trespasses against the Law of God would be paid by the suffering of our Lord in our flesh. He would die in our place on the tree of the cross.

Now, all those who are baptized into His death have been gifted with faith to cling to the One who is our sole Redeemer and Savior. We cling in faith to His works of redemption for us. Therefore, we are Abraham's seed, and as he was justified by faith in the promised Messiah, we too, are justified by faith in Him.

Collect: 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, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

In the Nicene Creed, we confess “one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God... by whom all things were made.” If Jesus is truly God—which He is (John 1:1)—it must follow that Jesus was truly involved in the divine work of creation. Our text says, “by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth.” Our Lord Jesus also holds all creation together, even at the present time: “in Him all things consist.” Jesus is everywhere, holding creation together and guiding it to His purpose.

But His divine presence everywhere must not be confused with His special presence in the Christian Church, His gracious presence. Apart from His grace in the Church, the world of sinners will see Him as a wrathful judge who condemns their darkness and wicked works. However, concerning the Church His Word says, “He is the head of the body, the church.” That is, salvation is not found just anywhere in creation, but only in the preaching and sacraments of the Christian Church, where God—the Son of God—unites Himself to men through Word and sacraments. This is why the Church was instituted: here and nowhere else does God unite Himself in a special way to those who have faith in His salvation.

Collect: 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 tabernacle of the Old Testament (so also the temple) had two rooms: the Sanctuary and the Holiest of All, and between these two was a curtain (Heb. 9:2–3). Priests could enter the Sanctuary, but past the curtain into the Holiest of All, where the Ark of the Covenant was, only the high priest could enter, and then only once a year. It is said that the high priest would wear bells and a rope around his ankles so that if God killed him the people could drag him out without passing the curtain.

These things foretold the Christ. Our text says, “Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus... through the veil, that is, His flesh...” The Jews were rightly afraid to enter the Holiest of All, because it represented God’s holy presence, which no sinner can enter. But, if we are first justified by the blood of Christ—that is, if we have faith that God is reconciled to us for the sake of Jesus’ death—we may enter His presence without fear.

When Jesus died, the curtain which separated the Sanctuary from the Holiest of All was torn in two (Matt. 27:51). This was to show that through Jesus we have free access to God’s presence. He who trusts in Jesus has been freed from guilt and fear, and is reconciled to God.

Collect: 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 prophets of old never saw the Lord Jesus. We too, have never seen the Lord Jesus in the flesh. But, the Lord God did speak to the prophets “at various times and in various ways” in order that He might reveal through them the coming of the Savior and Redeemer of the world. Though neither the prophets, nor we, have seen the Son of God, at His coming He revealed Himself in our flesh at His birth.

St. Paul writes to the Hebrews that “in these last days” God has “spoken to us by His Son.” Our Lord Jesus came in our flesh to fulfill the Law of God and endure our punishment on the tree of the cross. The prophets foretold His coming so that all those who believed on the coming Messiah would be saved by such faith. The apostles and New Testament ministers preach to us that the Lord Jesus has come. He has come and fulfilled all things necessary for our salvation.

We now await His return on the Last Day. He sits at the right hand of God the Father and will come again to judge both the quick and the dead. On that day we will enjoy for all eternity the things that were spoken by Him in these last days about our glorious home with Him. For He has redeemed us by His blood, and gathered us into His Church to receive His gifts.

Collect: 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, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

This Festival is not all about the Lord's first shedding of blood, but about our Lord placing Himself under the Law. He places Himself under the same Law to which we are subject. He does Himself what He has commanded His people to do. He obeys what He Himself demands.

In doing so, He fulfills perfectly all the requirements of this command. He is born perfectly and without sin, therefore, all those who by faith dwell in the Christ are without sin on account of Him. He is circumcised, therefore, we who cling to Him in faith are circumcised. He suffers and dies on the cross, therefore, we too have died to sin and shame. He is raised again from the dead so that we too, in the waters of Holy Baptism, are raised again as a new creation. He has fulfilled the Law perfectly for us, therefore, by faith we have put on the righteousness of the Christ.

He has subjected Himself to the Law, and has fulfilled it perfectly, so that all those who dwell in the Christ by the waters of Holy Baptism are now perfect in the eyes of God. We are perfect, holy, and without sin because our Lord subjected Himself to the Law.

Collect: O Merciful and Eternal God, heavenly Father, who didst cause Thy Son to endure circumcision and to be made subject to the Law that we might be redeemed from the curse of the Law, we beseech Thee, grant us grace to become partakers of this redemption and thus obtain eternal salvation; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, one true God, world without end. Amen.

What is Jesus' yoke? It is His righteousness. How does one take Jesus' yoke? When one believes that, not by any work or decision of man's, but for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ—His death and resurrection—God truly forgives sins. When one believes this, the righteousness of Christ is put on him, meaning that God no longer condemns him, but sees only the righteousness of Jesus which covers him.

Why is Jesus' yoke "easy"? It is comforting for the conscience. The burden of guilt on man is so heavy that it will drag him down to hell. But when, by faith, we put on the righteousness of Christ, the burden of guilt is removed. Jesus, who has no sin by nature, likewise has no guilt. With His righteousness upon us, we are given a clean conscience in the knowledge that God has forgiven us in Christ.

Why, then, is His righteousness called a "yoke" and a "burden"? Because faith in Christ comes at a cost. However, this cost is laughably small when compared with the benefit. Nonetheless, Christ suffered great torment in the flesh because He was righteous. Christians also should expect to suffer for believing in Christ. Moreover, His righteousness is a burden for our sinful flesh, which by nature despises God and rejects His righteousness. But this is a light burden compared with our natural guilt. For the burden of guilt leads to hell, but the yoke of Christ to eternal life.

Collect: 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.

Some argue whether the talents symbolize spiritual or material gifts. To avoid dispute, let us say that everything we have, whether possessions, vocation, soul, body, or anything else, is a sacred loan from God. Our very existence comes from Him, and He will judge us according to how we used it. Not everyone receives the same measure, but, “everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required” (Luke 12:48).

Of all that God has entrusted to us, the greatest is His Word and Doctrine—Jesus, Himself, is the Word made flesh. What man does with God’s Word is a matter of eternal life or damnation, whether he believes and keeps it, or rejects it.

Today is the Festival of St. Nicholas, a bishop and a confessor. He is remembered for his generous gifts to the poor, especially to children, and because he defended the Word of God at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. The heretic Arius had taught that Jesus was not true God, but something between God and the angels. St. Nicholas was among the faithful who condemned Arius and his false doctrine. By defending that Jesus is “of one substance with the Father” (Nicene Creed), St. Nicholas stood on the Doctrine of Scripture and was proved a “good and faithful servant” with what God had given him. We must all, likewise, be faithful with God’s Word and Doctrine.

Collect: O Lord, hear our prayers to Thee on this day of St. Nicholas, Thy Confessor and Bishop, that as Thou didst lead him to render faithful service to Thee, Thou wouldst lead us to faithfully confess our hope in Thy salvation, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

All men are conceived and born in sin. Sin affects everything man does. This is reflected in the Levitical purification laws. A woman who conceived and gave birth was considered unclean (Lev. 12:2). Inherited sin was passed on to the child and she bore this sinful child in her womb. A sacrifice and atonement needed to be made after bringing a sinful human being into the world.

But our Lord Jesus was not conceived in sin. The Holy Ghost overshadowed her, and Jesus was conceived in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Law testifies about the Lord, as He is the only One who has “opened up the womb” of a virgin by His birth. He is the only One who can truly be called “holy to the Lord,” for He is the only One who is *truly* holy, that is, born without sin.

Then why the need for a sacrifice? There was no law of Moses governing a child born without sin, but still His parents subject themselves and their Child to the law of Moses. In doing so, they and the Redeemer of the world are under the same Law to which all mankind is subject. Just as He was placed under the Law at His circumcision, now at His presentation in the temple He is under the Law too. He Himself would be the sinless sacrifice through which the world would be purified.

Collect: 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, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Abraham was called by the Lord out of the land of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan. The wise men also came from the land of the Chaldeans into the land of Canaan. They had heard the prophecies of a Messiah who would come to redeem people from their sins, and had seen the Child's star in the East. For this reason, they had come to worship the newborn King. They found Him in the city of King David, in Bethlehem, born to St. Mary and St. Joseph.

St. Joseph is told in a dream to flee into Egypt by an angel. This fulfills the prophecy of Hosea (11:1), that the Lord's Son would be called out of Egypt. Jesus would follow in the footsteps of His ancestors. Jacob and His family would flee the land of Canaan to go down into Egypt to be fed and find protection.

In both the coming of the wise men and the flight into Egypt, we see connections to the past. The Israelites were exiled to Babylon, and were slaves in Egypt. We see in this our Lord's grace, for out of the land of exile comes those who heard the prophecies of a Messiah and believed them. That the Lord goes into Egypt not as a destroyer, but to find protection, shows that He desires the hope of salvation to be proclaimed to all peoples.

Collect: 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, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

What does it mean to be the “salt of the earth”? Salt is a preservative; salt is added to meats to prevent spoiling. Likewise, the Gospel is preserved from generation to generation by the Office of Preaching. It is not the strength of the preacher, however, which does this. The Preaching Office is God's institution, and He uses men as His instruments for preserving the Gospel, beginning with the prophets, then the apostles, and finally the pastors of today.

St. Ambrose was such a preacher of the Gospel, being bishop of Milan in the 4th century. He is the author of this week's Office Hymn, “Savior of the Nations Come,” wherein the two natures in Christ—fully human and divine—are confessed. “Savior of the nations come, Virgin's Son, make here Thy home! Marvel now, O heaven and earth, that the Lord chose such a birth” (The Lutheran Hymnal, 95). This hymn is over 1,600 years old, but it so faithfully preserves the unchanging Gospel message that it remains a beloved hymn of the Church to this day, and it is sung every First Sunday in Advent.

Collect: O God, who didst give Saint Ambrose as a faithful teacher of the saving truth in a time of great trial, grant to Thy people zeal for Thy Word and faithful teachers for Thy Church, that they may stand steadfast against all error, through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who livest and reignest with Thee 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

Often missed because of our horror at Herod's murderous paranoia is that his slaughter is in "Bethlehem and all its districts," and not throughout all Judea. This doesn't make it any less of an atrocity, but is probably why the historian Josephus demonstrates Herod's evil, instead, by his attempt to kill all of the Jewish leaders gathered at Jericho. Though possibly fewer than 30 children were slaughtered, these were 1) children, 2) the children of his own people, 3) circumcised boys and, thus, recognized believers in the true God, and 4) collateral damage in an attempt to assassinate God Himself!

Animosity toward God is the case with all murder (cf. Genesis 9:6), yet it is so much more clearly the case in the attempted murder of the Messiah. Even with the corruption of the teaching of the prophecies by the time of Jesus' birth, one clearly shouldn't be trying to kill God's Anointed! When the attempt to do so mimics the actions of Pharaoh when he tried to assure the continued slavery of the Children of Israel, it is a horror that demonstrates the true status of those who were supposed to be God's own people. They were in slavery under sin (John 8:31–36), in bondage due to their inability to keep the Law and their attempts to subvert its commandments to make a mere feeling of peace (Galatians 4:23–31; Mark 7:9–13), and in desperate need of a Deliverer "like unto," but greater than, Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15–20)!

Collect: 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, who liveth and reigneth, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

As we prepare our hearts in this Advent season for the coming of our Lord, we do well to hear the Apostle's warning against false security. In this passage from Romans, Paul makes it clear that those who wish to condemn others without looking at their own sins are already tangled in the sin of false security; a sin which assumes they are right with God without trusting in the promise of God.

This thought is pressed even further as Paul points the reader to the certainty, impartiality, and completeness of God's righteous judgment. For those who rely on their own judgment, they will fail. To have false security is to believe that the sinful man is in charge of his standing with God, and, ultimately, to believe that they have no need for the promises of God in the Gospel. Instead, this false security relies on building yourself up by a standard of works and condemning others for doing the very same sins that the accuser is guilty of doing.

Knowing what we prepare to celebrate with the coming of our Lord, both in His first Advent and His second coming, we as baptized believers should not rely on a false security. We must rely solely on Christ, knowing that we are poor miserable sinners, saved by grace through faith in Christ alone. Those who are in Christ do not measure worth by their works, but by the works and promises of Christ.

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; who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Today's passage from St. Luke shows the weight of the reality of all salvation history. The Word is to be made flesh, God among us. At the hearing of the Word, the blessed virgin Mary conceives the only-begotten Son of God by the power of the Holy Ghost. Mary receives this Word and believes.

And yet, this passage has also been used in ways that may cause distraction from what is happening in the text itself. The papists wish to import extraordinary meaning to the angel's greeting to Mary when he says, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" They emphasize her more than the Savior that made her so blessed. Others with good intentions use this passage to determine major dates for the Christian calendar, which is an admirable endeavor compared to the papist twisting of Scripture for their Marian dogmas. But if arguments over dates and outward observances draw us away from the clear events of God's wonderful work, we are focused on lesser things.

Regardless of the motive or intention, if the weight of the text is not taken first, we miss the sheer awesomeness and scope of what is happening. The Word-made-flesh is being conceived. From the moment of conception, our Lord was true God and man, coming to save His people from their sins. This cannot be downplayed, whether for the calendar or the papists. For with God nothing will be impossible.

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; who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

How the Lord chooses to bless your brethren is not your concern, other than how He blesses them through you. All are to live to God's glory in whatever estate and with whatever vocations He determines. Part of our living within His Commandments to help and befriend our neighbor in his every bodily need, and to support, protect, and increase his income, house, and name is to honor the vocations, blessings, and challenges of our fellow Christians.

If it were noted in heaven that one suffered more, or less, for Christ than another, or was so prospered as to give more for the Kingdom, it wouldn't decrease our joy. Thus, it is of no concern now whether one glorifies God through a death like Peter's, or a longer earthly walk like John's. Instead, we know that "if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord...therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:8). We "rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep...[being] of the same mind toward one another," and "do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble" (Romans 12:15–16). Jesus' words concerning Peter and John remind us that they are His, and that in their writing we hear His voice above their own.

Collect: Merciful Lord, we beseech Thee to cast the bright beams of Thy light upon Thy Church, that it being instructed by the doctrine of the blessed Apostles, may so walk in the light of Thy truth, that it may at length attain to the light of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

So quickly after Messiah's birth we must see the blood of His saints! Yet, the world assures us that no one really hates us today; rather, we are said to have a persecution complex while being the real oppressors!

“Hatred,” as used in Scripture, includes all lowering of status—disregard, neglect, trivialization—which we usually receive, rather than the stones Stephen faced. The world is happy to have Jesus in the manger, if only they can keep Him there and not reckon Him as Lord. Their trivializing of Jesus is seen in their marginalizing and infantilizing of Christians. From it flows the idea that if we vote or govern in accord with godly convictions we would be tyrannizing them. Their doctrinaire godless view demands to reign, no matter how it subjugates us and robs us to accomplish what God opposes. Thus, they kill both Him and us in an unbloody fashion, attempting to stifle His reign over all, to make both His condemning Law and His saving atonement of none effect. The boldness that faith gives Stephen must be ours, as their hatred seeks to make Christ's Word and work irrelevant today!

Collect: Grant, O Lord, that, in all our sufferings here upon earth for the testimony of Thy truth, we may steadfastly look up to heaven, and by faith behold the glory that shall be revealed; and, being filled with the Holy Ghost, may learn to love and bless our persecutors by the example of Thy first martyr, Saint Stephen, who prayed for his murderers to Thee, O Blessed Jesus, who standest at the right hand of God to succor all those that suffer for Thee, our only Mediator and Advocate, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Yesterday, we discussed the awesome wonder of the conception of our Lord Jesus Christ as told in Luke's Gospel, and how no one, no matter the intention, should distract from the first priority of the text itself. In today's passage we see the Apostle Paul teach this principle as he prepares young Timothy for the ministry.

God's Word is the only thing that is sure in the Church. It is the only reliable narrative we have to know God is with us. The Scriptures do not just contain the promises of God, it is the promise delivered to us perfectly and without error. Even as evil men and impostors grow in their defiance of the Scriptures, Timothy is taught to be steadfast and to rebuke from the authority of the Scriptures.

Our prayer as Christians is to always see the great treasure we have in God's Holy Word and to rely on it as the ultimate authority for doctrine. Without the Scriptures, we have no surety of what God says to us and what he has promised us. This is why it is so important to prioritize the plain text of the Scripture first, so we can be sure of everything God has given to us in His Word. We pray that we are not led astray by distractions or falsehoods, but that we love God and enjoy His work in our lives.

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; who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

The struggle of the Christian to contend with the desires of the old Adam is a fight that can often feel more than exhausting. It can feel as though the believer takes two steps forward and then three steps backward. Some days are filled with joy, while others are filled with temptation. The Apostle Peter reminds us of the foundation for the life of the Christian even through the struggle: that you are cleansed from your sin.

Peter says that, “His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue,…” We are made partakers of the divine blessings, not through anything we offer to God, but through the precious blood of Jesus Christ. If any Christian lacks, he or she must remember the free gift of God in Christ. Remember your baptism. Know that you receive Christ’s true Body and Blood under bread and wine. Know that you are forgiven and have the assistance of the Holy Ghost to strengthen you and move you closer to Christ.

The struggle is difficult. The spirit is willing, yet the flesh is weak. Even in our weakness, the promises of God are not broken. The Lord loves His children, even at their darkest moments. He provides the means of grace to sanctify and cleanse us by the merits of Christ. As long as you have Christ, He is enough to carry you forward.

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; who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

“Lord, give me a sign!” Gideon sought confirmation of his leading God’s people into battle (Judges 6), confessing himself insufficient for the task. He timidly sought signs, not wanting to doubt or challenge God. Having the prophetic Word confirmed in the signs of Jesus (2 Peter 1:19), we confess that “God will not confer with us frail beings, unless through his external word and sacraments” (Smalcald Articles, Part 3, Article 8, Henkel translation). We seek to order our course in accord with that Word, trusting that in His grace and forgiveness our Lord will work all things together for the good of His Church, even though our reasoning and actions are imperfect.

Ahaz rejected the signs God had given Israel confirming His commands and promises because they presented a way to life as God’s children that wasn’t appealing to him. Thus, Ahaz takes the opposite tack with the prophet, feigning piety in refusing to name what sign would convince him to govern Israel as he’d ought, since there really was no sign that would cause him to want to give up his sin. The sign, therefore, that the Lord gives him is a direct confrontation with the wicked king: the Lord would give the gift of His perfectly holy presence, the gift of God the Son to take away all sin. The Messiah would be Immanuel—God with us, God for us, God to be our righteousness and victory over sin and death!

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. Amen.

There are no “normal” days this week—it is full of festivals and commemorations! Even supposing that you are reading this early in the day, you know that at sunset this weekday in Advent is transformed into the Eve of the Nativity of our Lord! Yet, even if we esteemed every day the same (Romans 14:5–6), none of them are mundane (literally: “worldly”) for the Christian, because each one is lived in the light of the eyewitness testimony of those who saw God the Son establishing fellowship between us and the Triune God, offering His blood for us to cleanse us from all sin!

St. John says he writes so that there may be fullness of joy in this fellowship, that the bearers of the Word may rejoice in the hearers receiving it and walking in Christ’s light. There is joy in letting the joy of God’s salvation (Psalm 51:12) light every facet of our lives, that He may shine through each one. This penitential season is brought to its full and proper conclusion by rejoicing in the truth Paul Gerhardt reveals already in the first stanza of his great Advent hymn, “O Lord, How Shall I Meet Thee,” and elaborates throughout: the Lord we need to be prepared to meet is the very One who Himself kindles His lamp of holiness within our breast and stands at the door to help and cheer us, and to safely guide us home.

Collect: Stir up, O Lord, we beseech Thee, Thy power, and come, and with great might succor us, that by the help of 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.

The Apostle Paul, working as probably the greatest missionary the Church has ever known, worked in fervency of his ministry to establish Christian congregations in the Body of Christ. Using the imagery of the betrothed, a chaste virgin, the Apostle expresses his righteous jealousy that the Corinthian church continue on the proper way, not to glory in themselves, but to glory in Christ.

Presenting the Church as a chaste virgin is not a concept that Paul is using lightly, either. The Church is the Bride of Christ, cleansed and made unblemished by her Bridegroom, and awaiting the consummation at the second Advent. This reality of the Bride and the Bridegroom has kept numerous saints and martyrs on the path of glory in Christ.

St. Lucy had the opportunity for worldly glory when she was betrothed to a pagan suitor, and yet she wished not to defy God by being unequally yoked. This is what led to Lucy’s capture and martyrdom, dying by the sword for the crime of being a Christian. One who seeks worldly glory may have advised St. Lucy to go through with the marriage and save herself the trouble of being martyred. But Lucy, like all other members of the Church, know that their allegiance, their betrothal, is first and foremost to Christ. Therefore, our hope, joy, and glory is in Christ alone.

Collect: 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 liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 14: MARK 13:5-13 2ND S. IN ADVENT

There are many who believe they can scope out the end times by their unique interpretation of the Scriptures, ...or of the newspapers. There are some who would believe all hype and sensationalism about the end of the world and yet completely miss the grand narrative which the plain meaning of the Scriptures would give us.

Our Lord Jesus warns of such people that would come saying they are the Christ, and yet are deceivers. They sensationalize and do not recognize the unfolding of history as the manifestation of God's fatherly will. They silence the truth, just as they persecuted the prophets, the apostles, and the martyrs before us.

Though we are getting close to the celebration of the first coming of our Lord at Christmas, let us not forget the second Advent of our Lord, as we learn throughout the Advent season. Let us not be taken by false prophets, nor by sensationalism. Let us turn always to the Word of God as we see history unfold, and wait with anticipation for the Lord's return. Let us not turn our eyes away from Christ and the surety of His Word, but rely on God alone so that all those who are claimed by Christ will endure to the end.

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; who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 23: MATTHEW 24:42-47 ST. THORLAK

An academic prodigy pressured toward the circles of social and political power, Thorlak Thorhallsson felt more comfortable gathering with the disabled and outcast. Today, some reasoned he had autism. His Augustinian convictions would not allow him to retreat fully to his "comfort zone," though. Study and contemplation were to benefit others; the proper use of material things in the Lord's service was godly, not being an ascetic hermit. Thus, Thorlak dedicated his life to rigorous service in reforming Christ's Church in Iceland, seeking to increase the piety of both clergy and laity. As most pastors were still married in 12th century Iceland, but often not remaining faithful in their first marriages, Bishop Thorlak helped restore godly living. He also worked to eradicate the sinful selling of Church offices and other practices that often left pastors so beholden to "benefactors" that they wouldn't condemn their sinful living.

St. Thorlak is remembered precisely because of his forgetting himself. Rather than utterly retreating to what might seem more natural or comfortable to him, he used those qualities for faithful service to Christ. Being able, by God's grace alone, to set aside both personal notoriety and what pleased his flesh, he tended the Master's house and flock, just as Jesus exhorts in our reading.

Collect: Merciful God, graciously look upon Thy Church here on earth. Strengthen Thy congregation and give Thy Church comfort and peace. Teach the leaders of Thy Church to unite against all obstacles to Thy Word. Guide those who are tempted. Comfort those who suffer any want of body or soul. Prepare Thy congregation to make ready to sincerely and faithfully celebrate the holy feast of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with Thee 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 first four verses present the purpose of the Gospel according to Saint Luke: education and assurance of the veracity of the teachings of Christianity that the recipient (Theophilus) has received thus far. The rest of our appointed meditation deals with the angelic prophecy of Gabriel about John the Baptizer's conception, birth, and purpose. This section reflects Luke's mastery of the Greek language, as well as his attention to social realities which will continue throughout the entire book.

The latter part of our text focuses on the priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth as regards their righteous nature and lack of children due to Elizabeth being barren. The author focuses on the proclamation and fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy related to Jesus and John, and both of their earthly ministries. Luke acknowledges that he was not one of the original twelve apostles. However, he powerfully defends his close association with those who were, as well as his own faithfulness in the earliest days of the New Testament ministry of Jesus Christ.

The third Gospel presents the works and teachings of Jesus that are important for understanding the way of salvation. Its scope is complete, starting with the birth of Christ, which is ushered in by the birth of His divinely appointed prophet, John the Baptizer.

Collect: 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.

Today we remember the Apostle Thomas' righteous and faithful confession of Jesus as his Lord and God. Saint Thomas gets an unfortunate name attributed to him: 'Doubting Thomas.' People are told to not be a "doubting Thomas" when they question taking something as fact without any physical evidence being provided. If we are honest with ourselves, we all have to admit that in Thomas' place we would also want to see what the other apostles had before accepting that Jesus had risen from the tomb and was appearing among them in His glorified body.

We are all doubters apart from the grace of God and His Spirit's work in us. Saint Thomas, in verse 28, makes the confession of faith in Jesus that every Christian must make. Saint Thomas confesses to Jesus that He is his Lord and his God. Each of us is addressed and described by Jesus' declaration about "those who have not seen and yet have believed." There are far more of us today that have not seen and yet believe than there were in the 1st century, for most believers on that first Resurrection Sunday had personally interacted with Jesus Christ in some way.

Whether one was there to see the Lord in person before His ascension or not, all the faithful of His Church are brought to that belief and confession by God's grace and power through His Holy Spirit and Word!

Collect: Grant, O Lord, unto Thy people a steadfastness in faith, that we might not be shaken by the doubts of the flesh, but ever be established in an unshakable hope in Christ Jesus, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Today is the second of the Ember Days, so let us meditate on the wonderful promise of the Redeemer we have from the prophet in today's reading. Isaiah speaks clearly of God's promised Messiah who shall come through the bloodline of King David and deliver a truly divine reign over the Lord's elect unto eternity. This Anointed King (the Christ) will bring with His holy rule the gifts of God: grace, joy, and glory. His Lordship over His Church will be marked by these divine attributes proclaimed throughout the holy Scriptures.

Verse 2 presents all the grace and glory delivered by the Spirit of the Lord, which rests upon the Christ more abundantly and fruitfully than on any other son of man, making Him the perfect, holy ruler. Wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and fear of the Lord, are the six royal endowments, arranged in three pairs. In chapter nine the prophet Isaiah declares God named the Christ "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Verse 5 from today's reading declares righteousness and faithfulness will be the marks that rule. As His disciples, we are taught and strengthened by His Word and Spirit so we can strive to have righteousness and faithfulness rule our days and declare our Christian confession for all to see.

Collect: 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.

Our text today opens with the conclusion of Mary's song of praise, the Magnificat, and the birth of John. The birth of John the Baptizer was a significant event due to the advanced age of Zechariah and Elizabeth, especially after a lifetime of barrenness for Elizabeth. The Lord had given them a child at last, and this brings family and friends to join in the joy of the special event as they prepare for John's rite of circumcision on the eighth day of his young life.

The entire reading centers around the amazing circumstances of John's birth, and demonstrates the fulfillment of the angel Gabriel's prophecy about this child. This is all highlighted by the unusual practice of not giving the child the name of his father, but instead "John"—a name which none of his relatives had used. This insistence of following the angel's instructions regarding these things results in Zechariah recovering his ability to speak, and thus praising God. The crowd assembled for the circumcision is described as fearful and amazed by the events, and perplexed with the question of "What then will this child be?" Jesus provides the answer to this question some years later when He declares of John to the crowds, "More than a prophet I say!"

Collect: 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.

Advent teaches us to focus on preparations for the coming glory of our Lord's wonderful Nativity. The historic observance of the quarterly Ember Days encourages us to sharpen our focus even more. In humble thanksgiving and repentance we remember that God provides good gifts for all, the wicked and the faithful, but His greatest gifts are revealed in the kingdom of our only Savior, Jesus Christ.

As all mankind fell into sin with Adam's transgression, we have been at war with God and each other ever since. In spite of Adam's sin, the Lord still provided for man to tend the fields and receive the fruits of the earth. Cain chose murder over faithful thanksgiving to the Lord, but still, nations multiplied over the earth and God continued to provide good things. His prophets were sent with messages to call people to repent, walk in the righteousness of God, and seek the peace of His holy house. The message of Advent is that the Lord truly fulfills His promises given through the prophets of the Old Testament and that the birth of the incarnate Lord establishes His kingdom of peace for us. In Christ Jesus the house of His holy Church is exalted and all nations are called to repent, turn from murderous rebellion, and receive the fruits of His labors from the cross. He still provides blessings to all, but the promises of everlasting peace are only for those who repent and believe according to the light of the Lord.

Collect: 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 strengthen our faith in Christ Jesus, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Those who questioned John were sent from the Pharisees. The Pharisees were a more 'conservative' religious party of the Jews. The statement about "the Christ" indicates that they are asking John if he professes himself to be the promised Messiah. Verses 26 and 27 demonstrate that John does not see himself as, nor claim to be, any of the individuals they listed—but instead declares there is One who comes after him who is far greater than he.

The title of "Lamb of God" used by the Baptizer, when coupled with the book of Revelation, indicates that John the Baptizer does see Jesus as the promised "Messiah", even though the One who is unknown by the questioners stands among them. This seems to be the general situation for the vast majority of the people, and certainly for the Jewish religious leaders of the time period. This is not so different from our own time when so many within popular Christianity (both laity and clergy) appear grossly ignorant of who Jesus truly is and what He truly brings.

At the conclusion of today's text, John the Baptizer gives a bold confession of the divinity of Jesus as "the Christ," the "Son of God." This section of the Gospel according to Saint John can be confusing for some because they forget that you have two men with the name "John" related to this text: John the Baptizer, who is being quoted by the author, John the Apostle.

Collect: 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.