

SATURDAY, JANUARY 2: ISAIAH 61:1-11

CHRISTMASTIDE

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.”

Our Lord Jesus proclaims in the Gospel of Luke that these things are fulfilled in Him. As He became flesh and blood at Christmas and died and rose again for us at Easter, these things are accomplished for all mankind! The good tidings are the message of abundant life that comes to us through faith in Jesus Christ. Our broken hearts are healed by His mercy as we are made to know that God Himself loves us and values us more than any other person ever could. We are made free in Him as we are taken from bondage to sin and the devil and given the light yoke of His righteousness. The chains of our sins are loosed and we are given a home in the kingdom of heaven on account of Christ.

Without Christ we are still poor, no matter how much material wealth we have. And our life is a prison without His righteousness. All the brokenheartedness in the world is because of sin. But thanks be to God that He makes His righteousness known in Christ and all that He teaches us, so that we may be blessed and freed to know the greater joy that comes to us from the power of His Word and Spirit!

We pray: Lord God, deliver us from evil and heal our souls, according to Your profound mercy in Christ Jesus. Amen.

THE LUTHERAN HERALD



ADVENT 2—CHRISTMAS
(DECEMBER 7, 2015—JANUARY 2, 2016)

A PUBLICATION OF
THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN DIOCESE OF
NORTH AMERICA

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

FRIDAY, JAN. 1: MIC. 4:1-8 THE CIRCUMCISION AND THE NAME OF JESUS

“He shall judge between many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

People hope and labor for peace on earth, but many who do fail to understand that it cannot be accomplished by the efforts of man. The Lord says in the Gospel accounts that there will be wars and rumors of war. Such things will happen as long as there is sin on the earth, which means such things will happen until He returns in glory to wipe away every tear and eliminate all sin and death.

It is certainly not wrong for us to work towards peace among mankind. But we must realize that man will never understand peace unless he first knows peace with God. When we understand that our evil and selfishness must be replaced with the kingdom of God and His righteousness, then we will begin to know what makes for true peace. As we are reconciled to God in Christ Jesus we are made to understand humility and justice.

A world without war will only exist in a world that is made new in Jesus Christ. Only He can bring peace among us, because only He can forgive our sins and change our hearts to do those things that make for true love and true righteousness toward all our neighbors.

We pray: Lord God, forgive us our trespasses, and make us able to truly love our neighbor and forgive those who trespass against us so that our peaceful work in this world may show Your truth that will bring everlasting peace to the world in Christ Jesus. Amen.

“He will bring forth justice for truth.”

Our God comes down to be with us in the flesh. Thanks be to God! He has not come to judge us yet; He did not come to snuff a weak, smoldering faith, or to trample one who is already bruised and broken. He shows patience, kindness, and forbearance. He give us time and opportunity to hear His Word and repent of our failings. He would have us all be saved and come to the knowledge of our forgiveness in His blood from the Cross.

But He is always a just God. Our Lord Jesus does not come first as a judge, but He still upholds righteousness. If we call Him a liar and deny that we are sinners in light of His holiness, then there is nothing left for us but His righteous judgment, which condemns us and casts us out in our obstinate faithlessness.

Jesus Christ will come again in glory to judge both the living and the dead. As long as there is time, there is also His mercy, because the Gospel of forgiveness in Him is still preached, and His Holy Spirit still comes to bring us to repentance and faith. Thanks be to God for this! May He keep us steadfast in His truth and righteousness, and find us faithful according to His Spirit when He does return as judge.

We pray: Lord God, be merciful toward us sinners and do not take Your Spirit or Your Word from us, but give us the joy of Your salvation in Jesus Christ. Amen.

King David had finished his house and was now dwelling in this grand estate. It is now that he feels he should not be living in this beautiful castle while the Lord’s House is still a tent—the same tent that was built in the wilderness during the Israelites forty years of wandering in the desert. So what does King David plan to do? He tells Nathan the prophet that he would like to build a Temple for the Lord that would rival his own dwelling place. This seemed like a good thing to all those who heard.

However, the Lord has other plans. The Lord God says that King David will not build Him a House, but rather He will build King David, and all the Israelites, a House. This House will be established forever in King David’s heir and son. We at first think of King Solomon, who ended up building the Temple for which King David planned and made preparations. But this House is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord Jesus Christ is both the heir of King David, whose throne is established forever, and He is also the Temple in which the once and forever sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins is carried out. Our Lord is both the High Priest who offers up Himself as the Lamb, and is the Lamb of sacrifice, which wins forgiveness, life, and salvation for all those who believe on Him.

In our repentance we go to that Temple—to that Throne of Grace—to receive from our Lord God the promise that He established with King David, that His mercy will not be taken away from us. He has built this Temple of our salvation by Himself for our benefit because we were not able.

For the repentant—those who humble themselves before the Lord on account of their sins, turn from their wicked, sinful ways, and pray and seek His face in faith so that He might forgive them—the Lord God has established His Temple. We also know it as His Throne of Grace, His Mercy Seat, and His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. All those who cling to Him in faith receive forgiveness and are justified on account of Christ's work of redemption.

However, those who do not believe, who cling to their wicked, sinful ways, the Lord God has promised that He will mete out His eternal punishment upon them. They are not justified; they are not forgiven, but rather receive the due punishment for their unbelief: the eternal wrath and condemnation of our Lord God in Hell.

This is why we should consider our sins, fear God's wrath, and turn from them in repentance. Further, the Lord God in His prophecy to King Solomon promises that He will allow turmoil and temptation in order that He might strengthen our faith and cause us to turn to Him when He says, "When I shut up heaven and there is no rain, or command the locusts to devour the land, or send pestilence among My people."

However, our Lord promises King Solomon, "You shall not fail to have a man as ruler in Israel." This Messianic prophecy brings our eyes of faith back to our Lord Jesus, Who lives and reigns forever on His Throne of Grace to grant all of us who cling to Him forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Without the Lord's merciful benefits we are all poor and lost. But He did not create us to be this way. His will has always been to make things very good for us. Sin corrupts our ways and turns us in on ourselves so that we fail to see and understand His ways. But in His mercy He sends His Word and Spirit to provide good for us once again.

"For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it."

Above all blessings, God came down from heaven be our Bread of Life in Jesus Christ. In Him we are filled with not just good things, but the best thing. We are filled with abundant life in the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life in the glorified world to come!

We pray: Lord God, give us this day our daily bread, and let that bread always remind us of Your countless mercies to us and the life we have in Christ Jesus. Amen.

“Indeed He says, ‘It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.’ ” (Isaiah 49:6)

As we confess in the Divine Service in the words of Simeon’s song, the Nunc Dimittis, our eyes have seen the Lord’s Salvation, prepared for all people to see in Jesus Christ. At Christmastime we rejoice in the revelation of our Lord’s mercy, which will be given to all nations throughout the rest of the year in His Church. We are made His holy people as we are taught His grace and forgiveness in the Gospel, taught His holiness in the wisdom of His Law, baptized into His death and resurrection unto new life, and fed the blessings of His Body and Blood which show His atonement for our sins.

The kingdom of God is not limited to some spot on the map or defined by the politics of men. It is wherever His Spirit and Word create true faith and manifest His holy works among us. Thanks be to God that His kingdom does come to us in Jesus Christ! With or without our prayers, He comes to us and blesses us according to His good will. May He always grant us His Spirit to see His Salvation!

We pray: Lord God, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. In Jesus Christ’s name, Amen.

Having just mentioned in chapter 7 the Virgin who would bear a Son to redeem Israel, Isaiah again in chapter 10 mentions both the Virgin and the Son. The Blessed Virgin Mary is the “Rod from the stem of Jesse” and our Lord Jesus Christ is the “Branch” that shall grow out of Jesse’s roots. As St. Ambrose says, “The root of Jesse the patriarch is the family of the Jews, Mary is the rod, Christ the flower of Mary, who, about to spread the good odor of faith throughout the whole world, budded forth from a virgin womb.”

The imagery that Isaiah is invoking is the image of the almond branch of Aaron the high priest, whose branch blossomed and fruited with almonds at the will of God, to establish him and all his descendants as the true priests of God. This imagery is used by Isaiah to point us to one of the vocations of our Lord Jesus. He is our High Priest. He offers the sacrifice of the Lamb, and is the Lamb of sacrifice Which redeems all mankind from sin, death, and the devil.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, our Messiah, the Anointed One of God, Who stands as our High Priest, and born of the Virgin Mary, stands as a banner to the people. He is the One to whom all those who repent of their sins cling in faith. He is the One Who all those who believe on go to and receive forgiveness of sins. For as Aaron’s staff budded with fragrant and sweet smelling almonds, our Lord’s grace and mercy is a sweet smelling odor of salvation, which also the Gentiles seek and in which they find a resting place from their sins.

Jeremiah the Prophet builds upon the preaching of Isaiah by pointing us once again to the Messiah, the Anointed One. The Lord Jesus, the Christ, must be born to be the High Priest that the Israelites never had. The shepherds of Israel who were supposed to feed the people of Israel with the pure Word of God have instead “scattered the flock, driven them away, and not attended to them” through their unfaithfulness and false teaching.

Therefore our Lord Jesus is born of the Virgin Mary, so that He might be the “Branch” of the “Rod from the stem of Jesse” in order to be a Shepherd—a High Priest—Who will feed them with the pure Word of God, and drive away their fears by giving them hope in a Savior. He will redeem them from sin, death, and the devil. He was born to bring mankind back into the sheepfold, so that we might be fruitful and increase in faith toward the One, True Triune God.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is not only our High Priest, but He is our King. He sits on His Throne of Grace, which He earned by His perfect obedience to the Law of God and His sacrifice in our place on the tree of the holy Cross, so that He might “reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth.” In other words, He grants to all of us who come to Him in contrition and faith forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation.

And the Church in grateful thanks lifts up her voice in one accord, and proclaims our Lord Jesus Christ to be “The Lord our Righteousness” for all eternity.

The selfishness of our sinful nature compels us to chase after false gods. It hisses in our ear that our source of good and help is in some person or thing other than God Himself. We might hang our hopes on the good that others show to us, or on the good that we try to do for others. We might try to find joy or comfort in goods or events. But these things can, and will, all pass away and in the end we will only be standing before the Lord. If we have ignored Him and placed our fear, love, and trust elsewhere, there will be no good or help left for us.

“Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 124:8). He alone is our ultimate righteousness and salvation. All other things are given to us out of His good creation to help and bless us, but they are empty and unable to help us if they are not part of His holy will and purpose.

He delivers and upholds His faithful people in Jesus Christ. The false images and gods of the Old Testament times had no power, especially when compared to the power of His promise in the coming Christ. And now the false hopes and efforts of this age are just as empty, especially when compared to the fullness of His grace revealed in Christ crucified.

We pray: Heavenly Father, grant us Your Spirit so that we may fear, love, and trust in You above all other things. And grant us true faithfulness in Your Son, Christ Jesus, who is our salvation and righteousness. In His name, Amen.

“And they shall abide.” This is a precious promise for all who believe. Christ is born in Bethlehem, as the prophet foretold. But the prophecy is far more than simply “where will the Christ be born?” Micah’s prophecy shows what kind of Messiah He will be and the results of His work for us. He will rule over the house of Israel as one even greater than David. He will stand and feed His flock in the strength of the Lord. His hand will not tremble as He gives sustenance to His lambs. His endurance will not wear thin as He shepherds His flock to the green pastures of His Word and the still waters of life. He shall be great, so great in fact, that He will bring peace to the ends of the earth. Not worldly peace. Wars and rumors of war must still go on until the end. But peace between God and man, because all who are justified by faith have peace with God, the peace which passes all human understanding. It passes all human understanding because it believes that God, in Christ, is for us and not against us, and that nothing in all of creation will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Justifying faith gives peace to the troubled conscience. This is how Christ will rule and shepherd his flock.

In this He will keep us so that we shall abide. No longer will the faithful be tossed to and fro with sin. No longer will instability and change cause us to fear God’s favor is lost. By faith in Christ we shall abide with Him both now and forever in the favor of God.

Grant us the peace through the knowledge that all our sins are forgiven in You, Lord Jesus. Amen.

When we sin we should not disdain our guilt. For it is the work of the Holy Ghost upon our conscience calling us back into repentance; calling us back from thinking that living contrary to God’s Law is okay; calling us back into faith in our Lord Jesus Christ as our One and Only Redeemer. We cannot save ourselves by our works, and when we sin, it is one more way that we are putting our works above God’s commands.

Our sin is an incurable disease. It is a severe wound caused by our enemies, the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. Receiving this wound has only one outcome: death. The Lord God tells the Prophet Jeremiah to tell the people that they should not cry about their affliction. They did this to themselves on account of their sin, therefore, they will not be able to find any medicine or home remedy to cure them of their incurable disease. The only way they are to be cured is by the working of the Lord God.

Therefore, our heavenly Father sends to us His One and Only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to bear our sick flesh, but Himself without sin, so that we might be cured from the curses caused by sin, death, and the devil, and we might take possession, through faith, of the heavenly Kingdom of our Lord. The Lord Jesus’ perfect fulfilling of the Law and His suffering in our place on the tree of the holy Cross wins for us forgiveness, life, and salvation. His Holy Ghost imparts those gifts to us through the means of grace—the medicine for our souls.

The Lord God tells Jeremiah to say to Israel a promise: “If you can break My covenant with the day and My covenant with the night, so that there will not be day and night in their season, then My covenant may also be broken with David My servant, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne.” In other words, this promise will not be broken. The Lord God will redeem His people Israel.

“Behold, the days are coming.” The days are coming when our Lord Jesus Christ will come again in power and great majesty and judge both the quick and the dead. His Advent—His coming—is near. It is at the gates; it comes quickly. Rejoice, O Daughter of Zion, for your redemption draws near. Our Lord Jesus is coming soon. And all of the troubles of this life will cease, and we will be with Him, and all the saints, for all eternity. Behold—look up; pay attention—the Day of our Lord is fast approaching.

This is what the season of Advent is all about: our Lord’s coming. For the Israelites it was the coming of the Messiah. And we will celebrate His birth in a couple of weeks, the event for which the Israelites were waiting. He comes to us each week in His Word spoken and in the Sacrament administered. And He will come again on the Last Day to judge both the quick and the dead.

During this Advent we wait for our Lord to come. But, in this expectation, we rejoice, for His promise cannot be broken. He will come. He has redeemed us. We have forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. Rejoice in this this, O Believer.

Ahaz will not ask for a sign from the Lord. He is pretending to be more pious than God because everyone knows you are not supposed to ask God for a sign. The Lord gives Ahaz a sign in condemnation of his unbelief. The Lord promises that the Syrians and Ephraimites shall not prevail against him and destroy the Davidic throne. The sign is the Immanuel child, the Messiah, to show Ahaz that the Lord will not go back on His Word to His servant David. The sign itself shows Ahaz that He is to place His trust in the Lord and not in His own scheming and prowess. A virgin will conceive, which is an impossible thing. The child will be Immanuel, “God with us,” that is, the child, born of woman, will be both God and man. The two firebrands who pose a threat to the Davidic throne are nothing compared to the great promises of God. Syria and Ephraim, with all their scheming, cannot usurp what God has ordained.

The baby born of Mary which we celebrate today is God’s sign, not only to Ahaz, but to all mankind that God desires to dwell with mankind and atone for its sin. The birth of Christ is a sign unto all of us that the Lord God has not forsaken sinners but that He wants all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Today we rejoice that Christ is born, proving that ours is the God who keeps His promises in the face of all adversity.

Heavenly Father, grant us joy at the birth of Thine Only-Begotten Son, for in the manger You show us Your faithfulness to all Your promises. Amen.

Do not make a covenant with death so that you believe it will not come for you until you're ready. Do not put your trust in any bargain you can make with the god of your imagination so that you will escape what your sins deserve. All such agreements and bargains are null and void because they rely upon idols of the heart that have no power or upon things over which you have no power.

There is but one way to circumvent death. There is but one mediator between God and man, the Lord Jesus Christ, whose birth we celebrate tomorrow. You cannot negotiate with the Christ child. He comes bearing the gifts of innocence, blessedness, and righteousness for all. He will resist any attempt to be made into an idol. He will not be a talisman to protect from evil things, for He Himself will willingly endure the vilest of things. Neither will He overlook your sins and wink at them. He is conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary to save you from your sins, not by overlooking them, but by taking every single one of them onto Himself so that He can die with every one of them on His shoulders.

Christ is the cornerstone that the Lord sets in Zion. It is foolishness to men, that your salvation would rest upon a child in a cattle trough. It is folly to human wisdom to trust an infant with anything. The Lord's ways are not ours though. This child is the foundation of the hope of mankind, for in this child alone is release from death and the forgiveness of every sin.

Heavenly Father, grant us grace to trust in Christ and not the inventions of our hearts. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord Third Sunday in Advent

Article V.

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

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

—The Augsburg Confession

Article XVI.

Of Political Order.

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

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

There are lots of mountains. There are mountaintop experiences which are emotional peaks. There are mountains of learning which people ascend in order to become enlightened. There are mountains of obstacles which people strive to overcome through discipline and exertion. There are false religious ideologies which appear to be mountains. Even the Law of Moses given on Mount Sinai is as un-keepable as a great mountain is unclimbable.

The Prophet Isaiah says that Christ's New Testament church is the mountain of the Lord's house! What, another mountain? But wait, this mountain "shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills." This mountain is over all of the rest.

Being a believer in the church should move one's emotions, but forgiveness is an objective fact, even when the emotions are quiet. In the church there is a great knowledge of grace, but salvation is not just the acquisition of enlightened facts. With faith in Christ, nothing will be able to take us away from Him. However, Christ's church does not take away a Christian's suffering and persecution. The church is established upon the righteousness of God's own beloved Son, and not a man-made theory. God's Son kept the mountain of the Law, and died for our transgressions. We are built on His perfect life and substitutionary death.

In this mountain (the church) on top of the mountains, we will be taught God's way of salvation, and through faith in Christ we will walk in His paths.

We pray: Almighty Father, give us a new heart of peace, so that we leave behind other mountains to go up to the mountain of the Lord, and dwell in the forgiveness of Christ's church. Amen.

Two days from now the church will celebrate the dawning of the Sun of Righteousness upon our sin-darkened world. American culture, working hand in hand with the false church, does its best to suppress the fact that there is no Christmas without Christ and without the Mass. They want to darken the remembrance of the Sun of Righteousness on this holy day, filling people's times with all sorts of holiday traditions (which usually detract from Church attendance), secular music void of Christ, and sentimentality. The world does not want to celebrate the rising of the Sun of Righteousness because to the world it will burn like an oven. Rejecting the forerunner of Christ, and Christ himself, they fear the scorching heat will turn them to stubble.

But for the Christian, the celebration of the rising of the Sun of Righteousness is a glorious dawn. The announcement that Christ is born fills the ears and sinks into the heart, kindling the warmth of faith in the breast. The news, heard every year at this time, cheers the faithful and penitent. If Christ is born, He is born for you. If Christ is born then He has assumed your human flesh and knows every weakness which the devil uses to harass you with temptation. If Christ is born and the Sun of Righteousness rises, the cold darkness of sin dissipates so that the sinner no longer stares into the darkness of his own heart, but looks to the Light of the World who has come to bring life and immortality to light. Repent of your sins and your sinfulness and enjoy the blessings of the Sun of Righteousness with healing in his wings.

Heavenly Father, grant unto us penitent hearts that we may receive the Christ child in joy and gladness. Amen.

The Lord's Messenger, St. John the Baptizer, daily prepares us to receive Christ by urging us to repent. Though long dead, the Baptizer still sits as a refiner and purifier of silver, using the heat of the divine law to show us our sins. His preaching is still a refiner's fire and launderer's soap, scrubbing sin from all who will hear his Word in humility. St. John's message echoes throughout history, calling all men to repent and believe the Gospel of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

As was in John's day, so it is our own. Many will not hear the Word of repentance and remission of sin for Christ's sake. Many close their ears to this teaching, preferring their sorceries, adulteries, perjuries, and their selfishness which closes their hearts to the needs of their neighbor. Rejoicing and reveling in their sinfulness they ignore St. John's message because they love their sin. The Law John preached remains in effect in our age though. The Lord comes in judgment against all those who do not fear Him in faith.

The Lord does not change. He is the only constant in the entire creation. Not only does His law remain, but so does His Gospel, that men's sins are forgiven when they believe that Christ has atoned for their sins. God so loved the world that He send Christ to earn righteousness for sinners. He demonstrates His constant love by providing the Ministry and the sacraments so that the righteousness of Christ may be bestowed on all who believe. He does not change. He will not revoke his holy gospel.

Lord God, keep us steadfast in your word of repentance that we may daily receive the remission of all our sins on account of Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

On the Last Day there will be a great reversal of the way things have been previously. Those who are the unrighteous exalted ones on the earth will be cast down. These "kings of the earth" were able to rule and oppress others by their lying and bullying, but no more. The Lord will bring to an end their sinful acts, and will gather them up and cast them into the pit.

Those who are the righteous ones in Christ will be exalted. These persecuted believers trusted in Christ, who was their strength and refuge. On the Last Day the righteous poor will be showered with the rich blessing of Christ. The needy will be given all the provisions that they need.

This coming day of the Lord is not a new development. Our God has foretold it since ancient times. The believers in Christ have always looked forward to "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." They knew, "Your counsels of old are faithfulness and truth." God will keep His Word. They have looked forward to that Last Day, saying, "Come, Lord Jesus!" Until that day finally arrives, believers humbly confess our sins and live thankful lives "in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God" (2 Peter 3:11-12).

We pray: Eternal Father, You who have provided a coming day to put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly, be our strength in distress, a refuge from the storm, and a shield from all harm, that we may be brought into the eternal kingdom of Your beloved Son. Amen.

Whenever our Lord Jesus Christ begins a parable saying, “The kingdom of heaven (or God) is like...,” he is not just explaining about heaven. Jesus is teaching about the way God works in His church right here and now on earth. Likewise, Isaiah’s description of what goes on “in this mountain” or in “the mountain of the Lord’s house” (Isaiah 2:2) explains God’s working in the New Testament church today!

First, there is a feast prepared for all people. Our heavenly King sends out His servants of the Word to say, “...all things are ready. Come to the wedding” (Matthew 22:4). Jesus Christ has finished His salvific work, and through faith we receive, that is, we eat of the blessings of His banqueting table: forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. The reception of Christ’s Body and Blood in Lord’s Supper is both a present reception of salvation, and a foretaste of the feast to come.

Second, through faith the shroud of death, which waits to consume all people, has been swallowed up forever. “O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?” (1 Corinthians 15:55). On Christ’s mountain church believers receive the Good News of a resurrection and new life with Christ.

Finally, believers enjoy peace and rest. “For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His” (Hebrews 4:10).

We pray: Gracious God, make us glad by the coming of Your kingdom to us through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments. Make us rejoice in the blessings of salvation which the Holy Spirit gives through faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Isaiah reminds us what sort of Lord we have there in the manger. In spite of His appearance as a lowly infant, He is far more than meets the eye. Isaiah says the “Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand.” The infant born of Mary is the Lord Himself who comes to save His people from their sins. The child appears empty handed, for no one brings anything with them when they come into the world. Yet Isaiah says, “Behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him.” The child brings a reward with Him which He will bestow on all who put their trust in His work. His work is before Him. He comes with the purpose of disarming the devil and evicting the evil foe from the hearts of men by atoning for men’s sins and bestowing the blessings of that atonement to all who believe that Christ’s righteousness is theirs by the Holy Ghost.

The babe in a manger, adored by shepherds, is Himself the Good Shepherd who will lay His life down for the sheep. The prophet writes, “He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young.” The child appears as none of these to the eyes of flesh. The eyes of faith see the child in the manger for what He truly is, our Good Shepherd here to feed us with His word, bear us in His arms, and carry away our sins so that He might lead us from us into the blessed pastures of everlasting life.

Lord God, give us, we pray, eyes of faith to see the Christ child as our Good Shepherd. 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.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17: ISAIAH 26:1-21

ADVENT 3

Armenian teaching says that either you make a decision for God and are saved, or don’t make a decision for God and are damned. It’s up to you. Calvinism teaches that God made a decision to save some, and God made a decision to damn others. This would mean that God has already determined your eternal destination, so you better hope you were picked for heaven. The Scriptures teach neither of these things.

The Scriptures teach that God earnestly desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. He sent His Son to die for the sins of the whole world, not just for believers. He calls men into the Pastoral Office to preach repentance and forgiveness. Like the Prophet Isaiah in today’s reading, our pastors direct us to “trust in the Lord” for our salvation, not in ourselves. If you are saved, God gets all the credit. All praise be to God for His graciousness and mercy. What about those who refuse God’s mercy in Jesus and are damned? The Scriptures place the blame solely on the person themselves as being “stiff-necked people” who “always resist the Holy Spirit” (Acts 7:51). Though God desired to save them, they “were not willing” (Matthew 22:37).

The Prophet Isaiah tells us that God’s grateful people will praise Him for their deliverance, “O Lord our God, masters besides You have had dominion over us; but by You only we make mention of Your name.” “The desire of our soul is for Your name and for the remembrance of You.”

We pray: Heavenly Father, give us ears to hear Your Word and trust in Your salvation—provided by the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Prophet Isaiah points us to Abraham. He trusted in Jesus Christ, the Savior who was to come. Galatians 3:6-9 says, “Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham.”

The Prophet Isaiah points us to Sarah. It was by means of Sarah’s womb that the line of the Promised Savior came. Hebrews 11:11 says, “By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.”

Isaiah directed believers to God’s promises to Abraham and Sarah in order to strengthen their faith that God would come to bring salvation and deliver God’s people. If Isaiah could do that, when the promised Savior had not yet come, then we, also, are doubly strengthened when we see the fulfillment of all God’s promises in Jesus. We need not be afraid of sin, death, or the insults of those who oppress us. The one who laid the foundations of the earth and the Christian church has established righteousness through faith in Christ.

We pray: Lord God, comfort Your people with the forgiveness of sins which proceeds from You, that we may listen to You always. Amen.

As a child I would carry the redeemable soda bottles back to the grocery store for my mother. They would buy them back for 10 cents apiece. Jesus has bought us back. Isaiah says, “And you shall be redeemed without money.” The cost for us is nothing; but the cost to our God is the precious body and blood of Christ. Out of great love for us, God gave us His Son. On Christmas Day we will hear the angel “who proclaims peace, who brings glad tidings of good things, who proclaims salvation.” Jesus Christ is the holy arm of the Lord “made bare” that He might fight for us and win our release. In the coming of Jesus Christ, our God is graciously carrying us back to Himself.

We sin when we don’t live thankful lives in Christ’s forgiveness. Our God desires that the redeemed of the Lord would “break forth into joy” and “sing together.” He desires lives of thankfulness and praise. He desires that we put on the “beautiful garments” of righteousness which the Lord Jesus has provided. He desires that we, who have blasphemed his Name, would know His Name and keep it holy.

He continues to call us to confession and absolution. Awake from your stupor. Depart from your sin. Believe in Christ and you are forgiven. “For the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard.” Join with the congregation to hear the watchmen proclaim the Gospel, and then respond with lives of thankfulness and praise.

We pray: Heavenly Father, give us thankful hearts that, believing in Christ, we may believe Your Holy Word and lead godly lives here in time, and thereafter in eternity. Amen.