



ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ

2024



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December 1, 2024

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign.”

ISAIAH 7:10-14

Asking for a sign from God is tricky business. It can feel rather presumptuous to make such a demand of God. We have no right to make him prove himself to us. But even if we can get over that concern, we don't always know what sort of sign to ask for or how we will know if we have seen it. God's ways of making himself known do not always match up with what we might expect or hope for.

King Ahaz was given a unique opportunity to ask God for a sign of assurance that Kings Rezin and Pekah would not destroy Jerusalem in the attack they were planning. Ahaz and his people were living in fear of the army being gathered against them, and the Lord sent Isaiah to the king to let him know that the Lord continued to abide with his people. But Ahaz took this moment to try to exercise some humility, refusing to ask the Lord for a sign. Somehow, Ahaz had concluded that directly defying the Lord would demonstrate his obedience.



It seems likely that Ahaz had some possible signs in mind. The Lord could wipe out the advancing army. He could rain down fire upon the enemies of Israel. He could unleash the powers of nature against those encamped against Jerusalem. There were lots of possibilities, but Ahaz would not ask. It's a bit like the friend or spouse who “doesn't care” what you have for dinner tonight, while secretly hoping you will guess what they want.

The Lord isn't interested in guessing games or pretend humility. Despite his refusal to ask, he's going to give Ahaz a sign, a truly baffling sign. A young woman will bear a son called Immanuel – God is with us. This hardly seems like the sort of sign that is going to scare off enemies or rally the troops within Jerusalem's walls.

Immanuel – God is with us. That's the promise we cling to in the midst of uncertainty and fear. And the great test of faith is whether we imagine that God with us is enough to meet the darkness we face. Couldn't God come up with something a bit more impressive than a promise that he is with us? Can we imagine that the Lord knows what he is doing when he makes this promise and gives this sign?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you invite and command us to pray and make our requests known to you. Give us boldness to be honest with you in prayer, to pour out our hearts, to speak the truth of our wants and needs, our fears and failures. And give us faith to trust that you know how to answer our prayers, even when your ways are a mystery to us. Amen.





December 2, 2024

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."

ISAIAH 9:1-7

One of the habits I picked up as a camp director responsible for a massive electric bill is that I compulsively turn off lights. I can't stand to see lights on in empty rooms and I don't like to turn lights on at all unless it's absolutely necessary. So, around my house I spend a fair amount of time in semi-darkness.

It's rather remarkable how our eyes adjust to darkness. That first moment of going from light to dark is disorienting, but soon our pupils dilate and we are able to make out shapes and find our way forward. Eventually, we almost forget that we are in darkness. Visitors to my house get a little perplexed to find it mostly cloaked in darkness, and I am reminded that what is "normal" to me is not exactly normal.



When we have walked in darkness for a long time, we don't always welcome light. When the light in your teenager's bedroom gets flipped on in the morning it is not always met with smiles and good cheer. When the overhead lights come on in a plane full of sleeping passengers, there is grumbling. When the headlights of an oncoming car are too bright we have some feelings about that.

Sinners are mixed up about light and darkness because darkness gives us a lot more hiding places than the light. In the light, the things we try to hide are revealed. In the light, we cannot deny the truth about ourselves. When we hear words like "on them light has shined" we know that is supposed to sound like good news, rescue, redemption. But there is a part of us that prefers to remain hidden, to stay out of the light.

This led to all sorts of problems when the true light who enlightens everyone showed up in Bethlehem. Sinners were drawn to that light while also wanting desperately to put that light out. When Isaiah announced that the people who walked in darkness had seen a great light, that was not the end of the story. The endless peace brought by this Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace would only come when the darkness was finally defeated once and for all. Thanks be to God that he didn't meet our rebellion with rejection.

PRAYER

Gracious God, shine your light into the darkest corners of our world, of our communities, of our homes, of our hearts. Bring us out of hiding and rebellion into faith and trust. Overcome our fear of the light with your steadfast love and mercy and make us bearers of light to the world. Amen.





December 3, 2024

For all this his anger has not turned away: his hand is stretched out still.

ISAIAH 9:8-17

The beauty and promise of the first seven verses of Isaiah's ninth chapter quickly give way to an entirely different tone. The Lord had sent a word of warning to his people, but they refused to hear it. They could not imagine that the Lord would ever turn his wrath upon them. They were convinced that they were immune from downfall.

Can we imagine such an attitude? I suspect we can. Even in our darkest moments, in this country we cling fiercely to our belief that there is nothing we cannot overcome. There is no challenge we cannot meet. Every year our presidents give us a state of the union address in which they assure us that our best days are ahead of us. And even if we get tired of the cliches of politicians, we never tire of the sentiment. We imagine ourselves unstoppable. So did Isaiah's people.



The Lord unleashed his punishment upon Israel for their rebellion and faithlessness and their enemies devoured them. Still, Isaiah tells us, the Lord's anger was not satisfied because the people continued to rebel. The leaders continue to lead them astray. The prophets continued to deliver false prophecies.

The central story of Israel is the Exodus. Our central story is the cross of Christ. In both we are reminded that God's mission does not go *around* the valley of the shadow of death. It is not glory unto glory. Ours is not the story of a faithful people being continuously rewarded for our faithfulness. Ours is a story of rebels, sinners, upon whom wrath is entirely appropriate. There is nothing in us that has progressed beyond those to whom Isaiah was speaking. It would be just as reasonable, just as righteous, for the Lord's hand to be stretched out against us.

And yet, the Lord has taken pity on us. He has had mercy upon us. He has gone ahead of us through death's dark valley to bring us into the kingdom of life. Isaiah's people did not turn back to the Lord, and neither do we. But he has turned toward us, and for Jesus' sake has promised to never turn away.

PRAYER

Merciful Father, we are rebels. We go our own way. We imagine we do not need what you have for us. We imagine we can get and keep for ourselves whatever we want or need. Open our eyes to the truth of your constant presence and provision. Bring us to see that our lives are entirely in your hands. And save us by the promise of your mercy. Amen.





December 4, 2024

“On that day his burden will be removed from your shoulder, and his yoke will be destroyed from your neck.”

ISAIAH 10:20-27

Isaiah prophesies of a coming day in which God will restore his people and will show the Assyrians who the Lord of Israel is. But in the meantime, Israel finds itself leaning on the one who struck them. They have come to depend on their conquerors to be their protectors. It sounds like a textbook example of abuse. The one who is the greatest threat to you is an even bigger threat if you turn away from them.



How often do we let fear of the unknown or fear of change or fear of being alone keep us locked in destructive patterns and destructive relationships? Even if the “known” is killing us, we prefer it to the “unknown” that might kill us in some other way. We become accomplices to our captors just to survive.

God promised to call back a remnant from the house of Jacob, a remnant who would trust in him rather than leaning on Assyria. He promised to redeem his people from their captors and restore them to their place of honor as his chosen ones. Their time of punishment was coming to an end. The burden of their estrangement from the Lord was about to be lifted, as they would be reunited with the one who had called them together as a people in the first place. The enemies who had taken advantage of Israel’s punishment would come to know what the Lord’s faithfulness to his people looks like.

In Christ Jesus we see the ultimate fulfillment of that faithfulness. He pulls his beloved out of the grip of those most treacherous of captors – sin, death, and the devil. We have become accomplices to those captors, clinging to the sin and death we know for fear of the unknown of the life of faith in Christ Jesus. But he refuses to leave us there, breaking through those bonds to set us free. The wondrous and slightly terrifying promise of the Gospel is that this one we don’t know very well knows us completely and in his grip we find true peace at last.

PRAYER

Gracious God, our fear and doubt move us to lean on the very things that are destroying us. We cannot find our way out of the bondage to sin that holds us so tightly. You, alone, are our rescue and respite. Turn our hearts toward you. Break the chains we’ve fashioned for ourselves and set us free as only you can. Amen.





December 5, 2024

"They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain: for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

ISAIAH 11:1-9

Our reading from Isaiah for today is often referred to as "The Peaceable Kingdom." It is a stunningly beautiful picture of God's intent for his kingdom. Seeing it laid out line after line, while beautiful, is also a reminder of the distance between that kingdom and this kingdom. A kingdom in which righteousness and faithfulness are the defining characteristics is something we can barely imagine. In fact, we do not even aspire to such things.

We are content with so much less than that. We will wave our flags in honor of kingdoms, nations, that know little of faithfulness and righteousness. In place of faithfulness, we anoint power. In place of righteousness, we baptize all manner of idolatry. We do not live in the peaceable kingdom and we're not getting closer to it step by step.



We're not getting closer to this kingdom, but it is getting closer to us. It is coming because Christ Jesus is ushering in this new kingdom. We don't have our fingers crossed, hoping someday a government is established that will create this kingdom. We have the sure and certain promise that God is bringing it about, in his time.

In that new kingdom we will finally truly know the Lord as he wishes to be known. We will no longer have to settle for seeing in a mirror dimly. We will no longer have to settle for glimpses of his glory, snapshots of his will. As waters cover the sea, that's how thoroughly the Lord will be known in his peaceable kingdom, his kingdom in which peace has finally been established between us and him.

Until that kingdom comes in all its glory, we have but glimpses, snippets, pictures of what the Lord has in store for us. We see those glimpses in the love a neighbor shows for another, in those moments when mercy carries the day, in the forgiveness between sinners, in the spontaneous care for the poor, the oppressed, the dispossessed that arises from time to time, in the grace and mercy that gets extended when it is most desperately needed. But the day is coming when that grace and mercy floods the whole creation in God's peaceable kingdom.

PRAYER

Lord of Creation, your kingdom is coming even without our prayers, but we ask that it would come also to us. Bring us at last to that day of grace and mercy. Make us inheritors with you of that peaceable kingdom and inspire our witness that the whole earth would know you. Amen.





December 6, 2024

“But the Lord will have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel.”

ISAIAH 14:1-2

Our world is filled with advice on what makes for healthy relationships and what types of behaviors are “deal breakers” between potential romantic partners. Much of the time, this advice is about having clear boundaries and expectations. When those boundaries are violated or expectations are not met, the only reasonable and healthy response is to end the relationship. The notion that people frequently fail to be their best selves and are in constant need of forgiveness from those they love is often not part of the equation.

Against that backdrop, the back and forth between the Lord and his people that we find in the Old Testament can be a little baffling. What makes God stick with his people despite the repeated cycle of faithlessness and rejection? Surely there were other options! The more we read the Old Testament, the more we read the history of the church or just the history of humanity, the more the flood becomes the only reasonable story in all of Scripture. That kind of punishment, while extreme, seems about right in response to the depth of our sin.



But again and again and again the Lord’s mercy prevails over his wrath. God’s love for his people cannot be extinguished by his anger. His commitment, his faithfulness, knows no limits. If a friend or family member were in a relationship like this, with a serial cheater, we would probably advise them to cut their losses. Even Moses agreed that adultery was grounds for divorce.

But the Lord simply will not leave his people. He will not issue a certificate of divorce. He will not say, “you’re on your own. I’ve run out of forgiveness.” He sticks with his people through whatever we throw his way. His mercy is expansive enough to absorb the entirety of our sin and rebellion.

In Christ Jesus, the mercy, love, and forgiveness the Lord showered upon Israel is extended to you and me. That same unwavering faithfulness now covers over all of our transgressions. It now washes clean all of our sin. Despite our transgressing of boundaries and failure to live up to even minimum expectations, Jesus refuses to put us out. He refuses to abandon us. He’s in this for the duration. This faithfulness is our salvation.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we engage in all sorts of infidelity. Our capacity to remain faithful has been overrun by our insatiable need to chase after the next thing. Thank you for your unwavering faithfulness to us. Thank you for having compassion on us, and for choosing us again and again and again. Amen.





December 7, 2024

"The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth."

ISAIAH 24:1-5

When we consider God's saving act on our behalf, our preference is to focus on the abundance of his grace and mercy. That's the part of the work of salvation that we like. It is less appealing to consider what it is we must be saved from. It is less appealing to be reminded of the disaster we are responsible for, the havoc we have wreaked on the Lord's creation.

Part of the work God is up to among us is letting us experience a taste of the consequences of our actions. In running from the Lord, we have run from his protection. Without his protection, without his provision, left to our own devices, we cannot make this world what we need it to be. Instead, we lay waste to it. When the Lord removes his covering hand from us, we see that waste looks like. "The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants."



That is not difficult for us to picture. I live along the Minnesota River. The river valley is beautiful about nine months out of the year here. Growing up on the tree-less prairie, I can't get enough of the valley. But the river itself is a different story. It lies polluted under its inhabitants and with all the different sources of the water flowing in that river, cleaning it up is a massive task. So the lifegiving benefits of a river – as a source of water and food – are lost to us.

That's part of the reality of life in a fallen world. We have to adapt to and live with the consequences of our destructive ways. And what we find is that what we adapt to is just less and less life. The end of this is clear. Even if we have the capacity to clean up a river, we do not have the capacity to solve the bigger problem of our self-destructive ways, our creation-destructive ways, our sinful ways.

This is the situation from which we need to be saved. This is why the Lord needs to intervene directly in his creation. This is why Christ comes into the world, to bring life out of the death that reigns among us. And he is up to the task. In fact, he has already defeated death and its power. It has no dominion over us any long. And it never will.

PRAYER

Creator of the Universe, the earth groans under the weight of our sin and destruction. Nothing short of your intervention can save us from the power of death we have unleashed. Thank you for your work of salvation through Christ Jesus. As we await the coming of your new creation, inspire our stewardship of the creation you've already given us. Amen.





December 8, 2024

"And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations: he will swallow up death forever."

ISAIAH 25:1-9

We live so thoroughly in the valley of the shadow of death that it's difficult for us to even imagine what Isaiah could mean when he says the Lord will swallow up death forever. Even 2000 years of Christian belief in the power of the resurrection hasn't really opened our imaginations to what the end of death could possibly mean. Our mental images of the new creation are entirely shaped by the reality of our lives lived in death's dark shadow.

We hear this when people talk about what they expect when they see their loved ones face to face in the resurrection. Mixed in with the hope of a joyful reunion is a sense that they may have some explaining to do about choices they made in life that their loved ones would not approve of. There is an assumption that in the new creation these relationships will be, essentially, the same as they are right now.

But imagine a day in which our relationships with God and one another are untainted by the power of sin and death. Imagine a day in which the scorecards are gone forever, a day of no disappointments, no failures, no disputes, no need for self-justification. This is what life outside of death's long shadow will look like in Isaiah's vision. It's life without this pall that is always cast over us. We're so accustomed to the pall that sometimes we don't even remember that it's there. But when that pall is removed we will finally know life as God has intended for us.

Death will be swallowed up forever. It will exert no power over us any longer. Our minds can't really imagine such a thing. But we don't have to imagine it and we don't have to try to create it. This is the new creation that God, himself, is ushering in. *He* has imagined it. He is creating it. He is bringing it into existence. And for Jesus' sake, you have a place in that new creation. And when you meet your loved ones face to face, when you meet the Lord face to face, there won't be any explaining to do. Christ Jesus will have taken care of that already.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we live with the constant reality of the power death hovering over us. But you promise something new. Console us now, as we live with loss and grief, and bring us, at last, to that kingdom in which there is no grief, that kingdom in which all will be made right because death has been swallowed up forever. Amen.



December 9, 2024

"O Lord our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us, but we acknowledge your name alone."

ISAIAH 26:7-13

When we think of a term like "idol" or "idolatry" it is easy for us to imagine some gold statue being worshiped out of ignorance, or some remote people who have had no opportunity to hear the gospel continuing the ancient religious traditions of their ancestors. What we do not usually imagine is believers who know the Lord finding themselves ruled over by other lords. But that is part of our reality, just as it was part of Israel's reality when Isaiah delivered God's word to them.

Whatever we fear, love, and trust most is our god, and unfortunately, we have no shortage of such things. It is fundamental to our nature to place other people, other things in the spot that is to be reserved for the Lord alone. Usually we are careful not to explicitly worship them, but the reality of how they rule over us is revealed when some sort of threat arises.

Perhaps our bank accounts rule over us, but we cannot admit it until a financial crisis is looming. Or maybe our families rule over us, but we only see it when we start to drift apart. Maybe our nation or philosophy of government is our god, and that becomes clear when we see the lengths we will go to to preserve what matters most to us. There are all sorts of lords hanging around, demanding our faithfulness, demanding our service, demanding our absolute loyalty.

Then there is this other Lord, who rules over us with peace, mercy, lovingkindness, steadfast love, forgiveness. This is a strange sort of ruler. This is a strange sort of Lord. All of our other lords leave us striving, disappointed, empty. But the Lord our God fills us up and our prayers, praise, and thanksgiving are nothing but a return of what he has given us.

These other lords are sneaky and in all kinds of ways very appealing to us. They hold out promises of abundance and fulfillment and peace, but they cannot deliver. They have no power to save us from what truly holds us captive. But the Lord our God has set for himself that very task. He has gone to work in his world for the express purpose of saving his beloved. He is the one worthy of our worship, our thanks, our faith.

PRAYER

Lord God, we cannot help ourselves when it comes to chasing after gods that cannot save us. Our sin carries us away from you toward all manner of idols. Send your Word, your Spirit, upon us that we would be turned back to you, and acknowledge your name alone as our Lord. Amen.

December 10, 2024

Or else let it cling to me for protection. let it make peace with me.

ISAIAH 27:2-6

When we read the first three chapters of Genesis, it all seems so baffling and . . . dumb. Humans, in the image of God, the pinnacle of this wondrous creation, are given everything they need for life. They eat of the fruit of the earth without any labor on their part. They are in the right relationship with their Creator – a relationship of trust. And without a second thought they throw it all away. They do not want to trust their Creator, if there is an opportunity to trust themselves instead.

The rest of the story of God's relationship with his creation is about establishing this right relationship between God and his people. In today's passage from Isaiah we hear something that sounds a lot like a plea from the Lord. His deepest desire is that his people would make peace with him. Enough of this war. Enough of this rebellion. Just be at peace.

The conventional wisdom in child-rearing is that children go through a rebellious streak that just has to be endured, and if the parents can remain steadfast and reliable, if they stay the course, the children will eventually grow out of it and return to the fold. This assumes, of course, that the children have no reasonable grounds for rebellion and that it is just a normal developmental phase.

Every generation since Eden has been in rebellion against God our Father, and we aren't giving any signs of being on the verge of growing out of it. It does not look like we are inching closer and closer toward returning to the fold and making peace with God. We are deeply committed to our self-destructive rebellion. No matter how much pain it causes us, it remains preferable, somehow, to trusting in the Lord as our Creator, our provider, our salvation.

The great and wondrous promise of the Gospel is that our Heavenly Father decided not to just stay the course and wait for us. Enough is enough. Instead of waiting for us to come around in search of a cease fire, he has simply declared peace between us for Jesus' sake. The war is over, even as we persist in our rebellion. For Jesus' sake God has, once again, become our protection, our refuge, our salvation, bringing an end to the hostilities between us. The victory is won, even as we must be raised to faith anew each morning.

PRAYER

King of the Universe, there is nothing we can offer in exchange for the life, the protection, the peace you have given us for Jesus' sake. And even our seeking after a way to pay you is a vestige of our sin. Fill us with your peace, which surpasses all of our understanding and overcomes all of our rebellion. Amen.



December 11, 2024

"Then your covenant with death will be annulled."

ISAIAH 28:14-18

We sometimes use the expression "making a deal with the devil" to describe an arrangement that might get us what we want in the short run but comes at a tremendous cost. There are endless opportunities in front of us to partner with someone we know cannot be trusted. The appeal is usually that they can get us to our desired goal a little quicker, or they can take down an obstacle in front of us, even if they put the obstacle there.

We don't usually mean the *actual* devil when we use that expression. Perhaps that is what makes Isaiah's language of a "covenant with death" so shocking. Why would anyone ever make a covenant with death!? What possible upside is there in that? What is the short-term gain for which Israel is willing to take on such a devastating cost?



It seems that they are counting on death to pass over them when it comes for everyone else. They are counting on the refuge of lies and falsehood to protect them from what is to come. The problem with covenants with untrustworthy partners is that they feel no obligation to hold up their end of the deal. If you've ever been in any kind of relationship with someone who habitually lies, there is no safety in that. You know that at some point you will be on the receiving end of that dishonesty.

A covenant with death can never lead to life. Death cannot create. It can only destroy. The leaves that are decaying on the ground outside my window, even if they may turn to fertile soil eventually, cannot generate life from within themselves. Isaiah warns Israel that when the scourge comes, death is not going to hold up its end of the covenant. They will be destroyed because Sheol cannot be trusted. Sheol is no refuge.

But there is a refuge in their midst. The Lord is laying a sure foundation, a cornerstone that will withstand any attack. When Christ Jesus comes into the world we will learn that the Lord himself is the cornerstone. He is establishing himself as our refuge and strength. No scourge of death shall be able to tear down the sanctuary of his mercy and lovingkindness. And he can be trusted to hold up, not only his end of the covenant, but ours as well.

PRAYER

Gracious God, we have made all sorts of bad deals in our lives, deals with partners we cannot trust. And we, ourselves, are not particularly trustworthy either. Break the chains of our covenants with sin and death and bring us into the refuge that is found in you alone. Amen.





December 12, 2024

“So I will again do amazing things with this people. shocking and amazing.”

ISAIAH 29:9-14

The verse quoted above is a surprising conclusion to today’s passage. God’s people have stupefied themselves. Their eyes and ears are closed. They are giving lip service to the faith of their fathers while being indifferent to the Lord. They are simply carrying out the ceremonies they once learned, but it has nothing to do with their relationship with God. Their hearts are far from him.

Why not just wash your hands of such people? Why not just leave sinners to the consequences of their sin? Why not just walk away? Surely the Creator of all that is could get along just fine without us. Or why not revisit the days of Noah and just start over? There would be all sorts of logic to that. It would be to a totally fair response to the relentless rebellion of God’s people.



Instead, after all of this, the Lord’s response is to promise to again do amazing things with this people. It won’t be all fun and games. There is some judgment coming their way. But even that judgment is for the sake of their salvation. God’s people must be reminded of who he is and what he intends for them. Part of what is going to happen among God’s people is that anything they have built up to obscure the Lord’s place in their midst will be torn down. Their own wisdom, their own discernment, their own traditions, their own commandments must give way to what the Lord is doing among them.

We might prefer if God would make use of what we’ve made, if he would bless what we’ve made, identifying it as our wonderful contribution to his kingdom. It is rather disappointing for us when he tears down the structures we’ve erected between us and him. But that is part of the amazing work he is doing among us. Any work of our own hands that we would rely on is actually a hindrance to faith. Our desire to see ourselves on equal footing with the Lord, making our own contributions to his kingdom, is the fruit of our original sin.

The Lord will again do amazing things with us, things beyond our imagination, beyond our control. He will again restore us to a right relationship with him and one another. That may seem like a small thing, but the brokenness of our relationship with God and others is the source of all of the strife in our lives and in the world. Through Christ Jesus, the Lord has resolved this forever.

PRAYER

Mighty Lord, at times we are so amazed by our own works that we fail to see your work among us, with us, and for us. Open our eyes and ears to your presence, to your wonder, to amazing deeds of power. And most of all, open our eyes and ears to Christ’s shocking and amazing work of salvation. Amen.





December 13, 2024

"No longer shall Jacob be ashamed."

ISAIAH 29:22-24

Skeletons in our closets. We all have them. There's something we wish we hadn't done and we hope no one finds out. There's someone in the family tree who is a source of shame. There's a failure or mistake that haunts us. There's an egregious failure of judgment that mortifies us. Big or small, significant or not, there's something back there that we imagine would harm our carefully cultivated reputation if it got out.

Jacob's skeletons weren't even in the closet. They were right out there for God and everyone to see. The descendants of Abraham had become a source of shame. Their faithlessness, their idolatry were mortifying to anyone who saw them. The Lord had redeemed Abraham all those generations before. He had chosen him from all peoples and made him his own. But the faith that defined Abraham had not survived down through the years.



Once again, rather than piling on to all the reasons Jacob *should* be ashamed, the Lord had a different word. Just as he had redeemed Abraham so long ago, the Lord was about to redeem the children of Abraham. They were about to be brought back to the faith of their fathers. They were about to be saved. If Israel imagined that the Lord hadn't noticed their sins, these words surely set them straight. The Lord had noticed. He had noticed the shame of Jacob. And he was driven to mercy.

If we imagine the Lord is fooled by our carefully cultivated images we're in for the same rather rude awakening as the children of Jacob. Everything there is to know about us, including those things we would prefer no one knew, especially those things, is known by the Living God. We have hidden nothing from him, despite all of our pious attempts at misdirection. But rather than driving us further into shame, further into hiding, the Lord comes to us with the promise to redeem.

We have heard this promise so many times that it may seem like old news to us, or it may just seem like the natural order of things. But here we are, people who try to hide things from even those who are closest to us, who we know are sinners with their own skeletons, and we are given the assurance that there is no need to hide from the Lord of the Universe. And the reason we have no need to hide is that when we stand before the Lord, we are clothed entirely in Christ.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, sometimes our guilt and shame are absolutely crippling to us. They drive us into the shadows, far from you, far from all those we love and those who love us. Sometimes this same guilt drives us to hide in arrogance or defiance. Rescue us from all of our hiding places and bring us into your merciful embrace. Amen.





December 14, 2024

"Blessed are all those who wait for him."

ISAIAH 30:18-26

I've learned some things about waiting of late. My youngest nephew was in a major car accident in late October. For several days we waited to see if he would ever wake up again. Then we waited to see if his brain injury meant he would not understand what was happening around him or would not be able to communicate what was happening in his head. Then we waited to see if his intense agitation was a permanent state or was driven by the combination of pain and a deep aversion to restraints. Then, when it was clear he would be able to communicate and that there may be no noticeable long term physical problems, we waited to see if the young man who was coming out of this crash was going to be fundamentally different than the one who got in the car. What kind of cognitive or memory deficits might he have? Just who was going to go home from the hospital?



I did not enjoy this waiting. And I found myself deeply resistant to any attempt to redeem this waiting, to find some kind of meaning in it. The deep reality in my heart and mind was that utter chaos had been unleashed and the power of death was in the driver's seat. While I clung to every little bit of good news, surprised each time, I would have chafed at anyone suggesting the situation was blessed.

As I write this, my nephew is preparing to leave the hospital tomorrow, well on his way to what looks like a full recovery. There will be more waiting ahead, but this time of intense waiting and watching and praying and hoping and fearing is drawing to a close, and what feels like an eternity has actually been one month. I am in awe of those who wait a lifetime for such blessings. I don't know how they survive.

And maybe that's the point after all. We don't really survive the times of tribulation, at least not in the way we imagine. We don't endure or remain steadfast or keep the faith or soldier on. Instead, we reach the end of ourselves. We come face to face with our limitations, our failures, our finitude. And then, at last, when we finally see that we can do nothing to will that child to wake up, we can do nothing to stop the cancer spreading through the body, we can do nothing to reverse the ravages of time upon our aging loved ones, we can do nothing to save ourselves, then, at long last, we see what the Lord can do. And then we truly know what it is to be blessed.

PRAYER

Gracious Father, we grow impatient in our waiting. We would prefer if you operated according to schedules we have made. We resist admitting the end of ourselves. Thank you for your patience with us. Thank you for your steadfastness in the face of our wavering, your faithfulness in the midst of our doubt. Your blessings are far greater than we can imagine. All we can do is marvel at them, at you. Amen.



December 15, 2024

Turn back to him whom you have deeply betrayed.

ISAIAH 31:1-7

When we find ourselves in trouble, we don't always think clearly about where to turn for help. We may look for help from those we see as having some kind of power we lack. We may seek help from those who are far enough outside of our circle that those closest to us will not have to find out about our trouble. We may go to those who have gotten in similar trouble themselves, after all, they must know the way out. In the midst of trouble, our judgment is deeply compromised and our instinct is to look for help in all the wrong places.

Isaiah issued a warning for those who were looking for help in a deeply wrong place. With the threat of the Assyrians bearing down upon them, there were those in Judah who looked to the enemy of their enemy for aid – Egypt. Perhaps they had forgotten the central story of their people, the story of what it looks like to be beholden to Egypt. The appeal of Egypt's strong army was enough to make them forget.

And in response to this the Lord reminded his people, once again, where they could find their true help. Egypt might be able to offer them a temporary solution to their problem, but the Lord alone would be their true salvation. Despite their betrayal, the Lord was not giving up on his wayward people. His commitment to his chosen ones would not be broken.

And in Christ that commitment was extended to us. We were made part of the chosen ones of God who could count on him to be our salvation no matter what enemies assail us. Like Judah, our instinct is to look for help elsewhere. Most often, we expect to find our help somewhere in the deep reserves of our capacity to pick ourselves up and dust ourselves off and get things right next time. When that doesn't work we have all sorts of other places we look for help – power, wealth, status, piety.

At the end of all our wandering, all of our looking elsewhere for help, we are brought back, once again, to the truth of where our help can be found. There is one who can rescue us from our enemies, one who can redeem us from our sin, and he has chosen to do precisely that, before we even think to ask, before we have turned back to him. He turns us back and that delivers us.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we look all over the place for help when we're in trouble and only as a last resort, when all else has failed, might we offer our petitions to you. Forgive us this betrayal and by your Word keep our eyes fixed upon you, our true life and salvation. Amen.



December 16, 2024

“A fool will no longer be called noble, nor a villain said to be honorable.”

ISAIAH 32:1-8

It's not difficult in our world to find examples of rewarding foolishness as if it were wise or embracing evil as if it were honorable. Spending even a few minutes online will treat you to an abundant array of “wise” sayings and deep insights that are utter nonsense. We will embrace any silly cliché that matches our self-interest. And we will heap honor upon anyone who is powerful enough to demand it, no matter how they came by that power.

As we are getting closer and closer to our celebration of God taking on flesh in Jesus Christ we are reminded of how upside down our world has been, how warped our perspective has been since sin grabbed hold of us. As we celebrate this incarnation with all the joy and sentimentality our traditions bring, it is easy for us to forget how the world actually received God in the flesh. We rejected his wisdom in favor of our foolishness. We condemned his honor in favor of villainous betrayal. Sin has the world upside down and backwards.



And that is what God is overcoming in Jesus Christ. We want to imagine that it is others who will be corrected. It is others who will finally see the light. It is others who have been confused or in error or in rebellion. Finally they will be brought to their senses. But the reality is that the entire creation must be made new. The entire creation is in the grip of sin and chaos, including us.

Isaiah promised that the day was coming when God's people would be ruled in righteousness, a day in which all of our sin and rebellion would be put behind us once and for all. This would be a day of upheaval. It would be a day in which the truth would reign over our falsehoods. It would be a day when all things would be made new. That day is the day of Jesus Christ.

Jesus reigns in righteousness not to vindicate us and our views. He hasn't come into the world to congratulate us on what a great job we've done. He reigns in righteousness to redeem us, to make right what we have made wrong. He reigns in righteousness to make us righteous. Even our rejection of him, even our honoring the villainous and bowing to the foolish could not turn him away from his purposes in coming to save. Nothing can stop the day of the Lord. Not even us.

PRAYER

Ruler of the Universe, we are easily led astray by foolishness and villainy. We are quick to honor what is dishonorable. Break the hold that sin has over us so that we would be conformed to your will, and bring us at last into your reign of righteousness. Amen.





December 17, 2024

“O Lord, be gracious to us: we wait for you.”

ISAIAH 33:2-6

Augustine famously wrote, “. . . our heart is restless until it rests in you.” We might imagine that this restlessness would result in diligently seeking the Lord where he may be found, but I’m not convinced of that. Perhaps that restlessness is at the heart of our sense of waiting. During this season of Advent we are self-conscious about our waiting, but we spend a lot of time year-round in semi-conscious waiting. Watching my nephew’s recovery I got a pretty good glimpse at the confusion, and even danger, that comes with semi-consciousness.

The powerful and relentless accusation of the law makes it clear to us that things are not as they should be. The world is not as it should be. We are not as we should be. Something is fundamentally wrong. And we wait. We wait for a hint at what we’re supposed to do about it. We wait in semi-consciousness for the fog to lift so that we can get ourselves out of this mess. And that waiting can be a time of deep restlessness. When is this all going to be resolved!?



Judah was conscious of the fact that they were waiting for the Lord. Or maybe they were semi-conscious. They had a vague idea that they were waiting for God to act, but their ideas about what that action might look like were foggy and confused. They were a bit more certain of the righteousness of their waiting, even as their own sin and rebellion was the cause of their current predicament.

Judah was right to have confidence in the Lord’s work on their behalf. He had a covenant that he would not break. They were a bit mixed up about their own obedience to the covenant. But still, in spite of all the reasons not to, the Lord was intent on redeeming them, intent on redeeming his creation.

We are restless as we wait for the day when we will know the fulness of that redemption. But the promise of the Gospel is that, at last, we will find our rest in the Christ’s graciousness and mercy. In him, the veil is lifted and we finally see clearly the God who is for us, and all of our searching and wandering and wondering will come to an end.

PRAYER

Lord be gracious to us; we wait for you. Be our salvation in the time of trouble. Be our hope in the midst of despair. Be our light in the darkness. Be our truth in the chaos of confusion. Be our rest in our restlessness. Amen.



December 18, 2024

*“Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense. He will come to save you.”*

ISAIAH 35:1-10

Isaiah paints a beautiful portrait of the return of the redeemed to the Promised Land. On that day the glory of the Lord would be revealed to those who had been living in darkness and fear and exile. But Isaiah knows that this promise of the arrival of the Lord among his people might not be a source of peace and comfort for everyone. For some, the prospect of the Lord being close by might be a source of fear.

This is the Lord of lords, the God of gods we’re talking about here. There is power in his hands. There is power in his presence. And you don’t have to be very experienced in the ways of the world to know that sometimes it is safest to just steer clear of the powerful. One never knows for sure how the powerful might exercise their power, especially over the powerless. And the exiles of Judah and Israel were certainly powerless.

But Isaiah has an important word of assurance for his people. God is coming to save them. That is the purpose of his arrival in their midst. He isn’t coming to call them to account for all of their failures. He isn’t coming to deliver an even more extreme punishment than the exile they were already experiencing. He was coming to bring them home, and it is his enemies, who had relished in punishing his people, who would feel the weight of his wrath.

In a week we will celebrate God’s arrival in our midst. For us, he arrived as a baby, vulnerable to all sorts of dangers, dependent on his young mother and her betrothed who had no obligations to him. God arriving in our midst in this way probably doesn’t strike a lot of fear in us. What kind of vengeance or recompense could be brought by such a one as this? On the other hand, what kind of salvation could be brought by such as one as this? That question is going to stick around when this child becomes an adult who doesn’t go about his saving work in a way that makes sense to anyone.

But here is your God! This child in a stable. This man who collects the lost and rejected. This Lord who serves. This king whose throne is a manger and whose crown is made of thorns. Here is your God! He has come to save you, and nothing, not even death, can overcome the power in his hands, the power he is putting to work on your behalf.

PRAYER

God of the universe, it is astonishing that you would put your power to work on our behalf when we have lived in constant rebellion against you. The knowledge of our sin makes us fearful of you. Strengthen our faith that we would look to you for comfort and salvation, without fear. Amen.



December 19, 2024

Comfort. O comfort my people, says your God.

ISAIAH 40:1-5

John the Baptist stood by the Jordan River preaching his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, hearkening back to these words from Isaiah, preparing the way of the Lord. But John's wasn't exactly a word of comfort. At times it even seemed that he was irritated that people he didn't quite approve of were coming out to listen to him. Calling his hearers a brood of vipers is not exactly speaking "tenderly" to Jerusalem.

Whatever John understood about the assignment, the fact remains that the glory of the Lord was, indeed, revealed out there in the wilderness, at the river. And what strange glory it proved to be. A carpenter from Galilee showed up to be baptized. Not a prince from Bethlehem or a teacher from Jerusalem – a carpenter from Galilee. He stood in that long line of sinners, waiting his turn for this washing. He went down into the water of the Jordan like everyone else. With so many people going out to John, one more baptism was hardly noticeable.



But this one was unlike all the others. When this carpenter came up out of the water the Spirit descended upon him and a voice from heaven announced that this was God's beloved Son. Hundreds of people had stood in that line. Hundreds of people had been washed in that river. Jesus looked just like all of them, but in him the glory of the Lord was revealed. While he may have looked like the others, he was quite different. He was the only one in that line who was God in the flesh.

Unlike all the others in that line, Jesus was the one bringing the comfort to God's people that Isaiah had prophesied. Through him, our estrangement from God would be healed, once and for all. Through him, all the rough, uneven places, all of the ground upon which we stumble and fall again and again, is made level.

In Isaiah's prophesy, Israel's comfort was the result of having served their penalty. They had received the proper punishment for their sin and were going to be restored. The comfort that is ours in Jesus is not the result of our having paid our debt or served our term. It is pure gift, infinite mercy. What we receive from Christ's hand is grace upon grace, a truly tender word.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you are our true comfort in distress, even when we do not know to look to you. Your glory does not look like what we imagine, disguised as compassion and mercy and so we turn away in search of something more impressive. Continue to speak your tender word of forgiveness and new life to us until our ears are finally opened, and we see, at last, the glory of God in you. Amen.





December 20, 2024

"They shall run and not be wear. they shall walk and not faint."

ISAIAH 40:21-31

These familiar words from Isaiah chapter 40 are engraved on plaques and embroidered on pillows in Christian homes all over the world. This assurance of God's restoration of his beloved, his presence and power to strengthen the weak, speaks comfort to those whose faith is wavering. The power of Almighty God himself will be poured out upon those who wait for him and their weariness will come to an end.

In the midst of these beautiful words is a not very beautiful question. "Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God?" These words of comfort and assurance are not spoken to a people patiently waiting upon the Lord to act. They are not spoken to ones steadfast and sure of the Lord's faithfulness. They are spoken to people who are fairly certain that the Lord has abandoned them.



There's a social media experiment floating around in which parents put some candy on the table in front of their children, tell them not to eat it, and then say, "I'll be right back." All of this, of course, is captured on camera (and shared with the whole wide world) as the children are "tested" and mostly fail. We're not usually this direct with such things, but we are constantly testing one another. Testing the loyalty of spouses or friends, testing the limits of teachers, testing the patience of employers. From a young age we pick up testing as the most effective means of figuring out who we can trust, and even who we can manipulate.

If the Lord was testing Israel with the exile, they failed. They did not just take it all in stride, recognizing that even when things look really bad, the Lord was always for them. They concluded that their right had been disregarded by God. And God called them back anyway. Just think about what that says about what God has to do with us! He's not waiting around to see if we will pass the test, remain steadfast in faith, be worthy of his love.

Instead, he proves himself to us again and again and again. *He* remains steadfast in faith. *He* remains committed to his promises. *He* calls sinners back to life in him, life in which we will run and not be weary, walk and not be faint.

PRAYER

Holy One of Israel, we put you to the test again and again and again, constantly doubting your will to save us, constantly doubting your faithfulness to us, constantly concluding that we can only count on ourselves. That is the source of our weariness. Renew our strength and bring us back to you. Amen.





December 21, 2024

"See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare."

ISAIAH 42:1-9

About once a quarter a box is delivered to my house with four or five items of clothing in it. It's a subscription service that allows me to never have to go shopping in a store, which I am very grateful for. So, every few months I have a few new outfits. But a person might not notice this because the information I've given to the company has resulted in them sending me a lot of things that look very much like things I already have. They are new, but predictable. They are new, but not really.

Israel probably had their own ideas about what new things the Lord might have in store. They undoubtedly were ready to say goodbye to exile and banish it to their history while welcoming the new day of freedom and restoration. And what a glorious new day that would be. It would be a day for great celebration. But it might not have exactly been "new" that they were looking for. Restoration actually is about reclaiming the old, getting back what you've already had.



Israel, and maybe even Isaiah, could not have imagined the full extent of the truly new thing God had planned for his creation. While Israel had been the Lord's witnesses in the world for generations, in the new day that was coming, the Lord himself would deliver his word directly to his world. The covenant relationship that had established and defined Israel for generations would be extended to the nations.

The first glimpse of the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy happened when God's people returned from exile. In this return they saw the faithfulness of their Lord and his unwavering will to save them. But another fulfillment, a more complete fulfillment, would come generations later, when God arrived on the scene in the flesh in Jesus. In Jesus, justice and righteousness – a right relationship with God and the neighbor – would be established. He would not cry out against his abusers or further crush those already being crushed under the weight of their sin.

This is truly a new thing. God chose to come and dwell with his people in a new way. He chose to become one of us, to walk among us, so that we might know who he is *for* us. This was not just the final step in an obvious sequence of events. It was not simply the culmination of what the covenant with Abraham always assumed. The Lord went to battle with sin and death *within* his creation to break their hold forever. And that battle has been won for you, forever.

PRAYER

Lord of the nations, you have made us part of your chosen people for Jesus' sake. Thank you for the new thing you have done for us, defeating sin and giving us a life that is not subject to death. Grant us faith to trust that what Jesus accomplished he accomplished for us. Amen.





December 22, 2024

“Because you are precious in my sight and honored, and I love you.”

ISAIAH 43:1-7

Working through the book of Isaiah, or maybe just the Bible in general, always provokes a question in me. Why would the Lord do all this? Why go to such trouble for sinners? Why take on the weight of our sin? Why give his life for us? Why keep calling us back again and again and again when we demonstrate our waywardness continuously? It seems so futile. And perhaps more jarring than the futility of it, it seems somewhat beneath the dignity of the Creator of the Universe.

Finally, here in chapter 43 we get a clear and wondrous answer to the question of why the Lord goes to so much trouble – he loves us. What an astonishing thing. The Lord of lords is moved by love toward his people, despite the fact that we are not especially loveable. The one we reject and betray loves us.



Even the most generous and gracious among us have limits to our love. We have a breaking point. We reach the moment when we conclude, “this just isn’t working for me anymore.” That may result in an actual end to a relationship or it may just mean our hearts turn cold toward the one we once loved but cannot any longer. Whole cottage industries are devoted to making certain that love is healthy and that no one is taken advantage of or mistreated. When relationships become difficult there is always someone ready to encourage us to “go no contact” with the one who has wronged us. Love between sinners will always be damaged and limited and by our sin. There will always remain some need to protect ourselves.

But the love God has for us knows no limit. It is untouched by sin. It is pure. He takes delight in the ones he has made. Like a parent who delights in seeing who their children are becoming and who is thrilled when they come home for the holidays, we are precious in the sight of the Lord. Here we are, sinners to our very core, and the perfect love of God is ours. There is no logic, no theological categorizing, that can make that make sense. It is rightfully a source of awe and wonder.

We are now just a couple of days away from celebrating the incarnation of this love in our midst and the line “of the Father’s love begotten” rings in my ear. This entire creation, the whole covenant, and the new thing that is Jesus’ birth are all driven by the Father’s love for us, his delight in his precious children. What wondrous love is this.

PRAYER

Loving Father, we speak rather casually of love in our world and we never truly grasp the depth of your love for us. Open up our hearts to you and to the neighbors you have given us. Pour out your love upon us that it would overflow in our world and all would come to know you as the source of life and love and salvation, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.





December 23, 2024

“There is no other rock: I know not one.”

ISAIAH 44:6-8

I grew up in the early years of Sesame Street, and it was a staple in our house. There was a recurring bit with the line “one of these kids is not like the others.” There were four kids pictured on the screen and there was something different about one of them and you had to figure out what it was. Today’s section from Isaiah could be tagged, “one of these Gods is not like the others.” The people of the Lord needed a little reminder about a fundamental truth.

While suffering in exile it’s not hard to understand why Israel might have needed some convincing that the Lord both could and would do the things Isaiah was promising them. They were living under the domination of the Assyrians, who had their own gods they assumed were working on their behalf. And to any observer it certainly looked like the gods of the Assyrians had bested the God of Israel.

Then Isaiah comes with this remarkable word. Not only have the gods of the Assyrians *not* defeated the God of Israel. They are, in fact, not gods at all. Besides the Lord, there is no god. The God of Israel is not in some sort of contest with other gods, with uncertainty about who is actually stronger. He is the only God on the field. None others exist.



Of course, that doesn’t mean we don’t *worship* other gods. We do that all the time, hardly giving it a second thought. We chase after other gods all day every day, hoping that they will fulfill our hopes and dreams. We’re no different than the Assyrians. And like the Assyrians, the reality for us is that these gods we worship are entirely powerless to save us because they are not gods at all.

That makes things a little awkward for us. Here we are, worshiping that which cannot save, praying to that which cannot hear, while the Lord of the Universe holds us in his hands. We shouldn’t be doing that. We shouldn’t be chasing after all these false gods when the one true and living God has made us his own. And yet, we can’t stop ourselves.

The fact that we can’t stop ourselves doesn’t mean we can’t be stopped, but it’s going to take divine intervention. We’re about to celebrate that intervention – the arrival of the rock of salvation in our world. And because he is the one true God, his intervention on our behalf is all we need.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you have saved us and yet we keep looking elsewhere for salvation. Send your Spirit upon us that we would trust in you alone and know you alone as our Lord. Break us free from the idols we cling to and give us true faith. Amen.



December 24, 2024

"I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud."

ISAIAH 44:21-28

It's Christmas Eve, but today's reading takes us straight to the cross of Christ. We are celebrating the Incarnation, but we have this wondrous word of where it's all headed. This baby born in Bethlehem has come for a purpose. He is on a mission. He has work to do.

The work he has to do is much more than being a compelling teacher who brings us to a better understanding of the intent of God's law. It is much more than a handful of impressive miracles. It is much more than generating a big following. It is much more than giving us some encouragement or direction to help us navigate the difficulties of life's road.

This one who, tonight, we picture in his mother's arms, will have his own arms stretched out to take on the sins of the world. While this day is filled with beautiful images, there are ugly days ahead. But what is accomplished in the ugliest day is the most beautiful thing we could ever imagine. This Jesus stretches out his arms and sweeps away all of our sin, forever. That's his mission. That's why he takes on flesh in Bethlehem.

And once he has swept your sins away, they are really and truly swept away. They have no power over you anymore. They are not being counted against you anymore. They are not separating you from God anymore. They are not a wall between you and your neighbor anymore. Your sins have been swept away for Jesus' sake. All of them. Forever.

This is the work of the Lord's anointed, the Messiah, the Christ. As we hear again today the story of his miraculous birth we are still mindful of his miraculous defeat of death. The Lord did not forget Israel while they languished in exile. He did not forget them when they were slaves in Egypt. He did not forget Noah in the ark with his family. He did not forget the promise he made to Abraham and that he renewed to Jacob. He did not forget King David, no matter how far he strayed. And he will never, ever forget you. You bear the mark of Christ upon you. You carry his name. The only thing he forgets about you is your sin.

PRAYER

Gracious God, sometimes during these most joyous of days some might feel forgotten. Remember those who are alone today. Remember those who mourn. Remember those whose families are in strife. Remember those who cannot be with loved ones. Remember those who are imprisoned or in exile. Remember those who are captive to guilt and shame. Send your Spirit upon anyone who feels forgotten, that they would know your love and your peace that passes understanding. Amen.