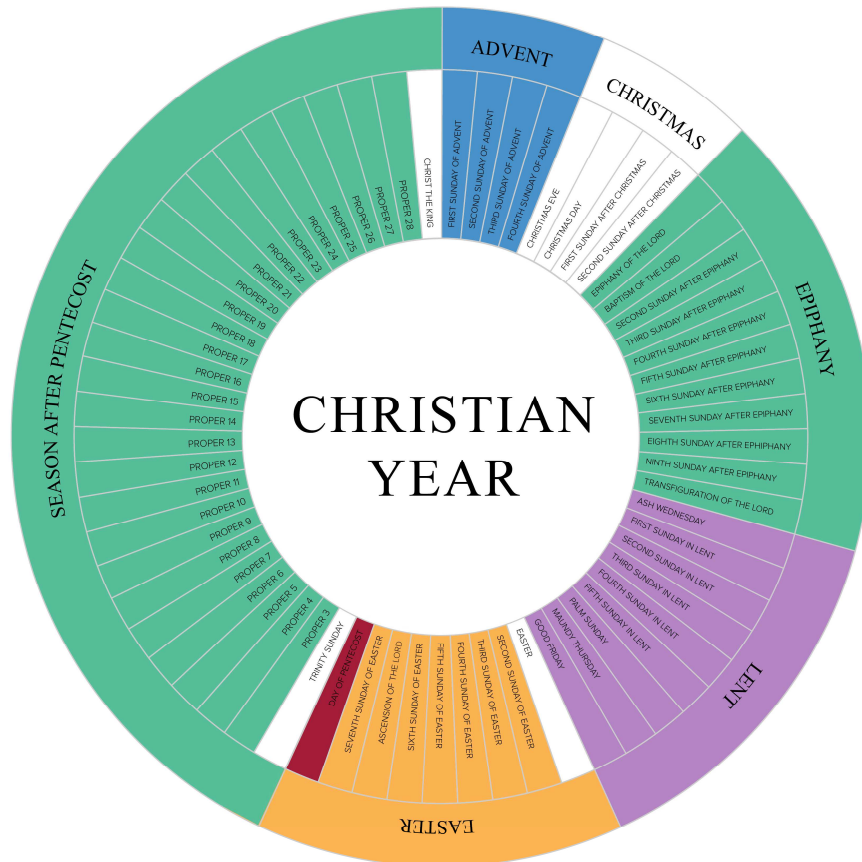


*Good news
of great joy*

ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS
DEVOTIONAL





The Christian Year

In Deuteronomy 6:4-9 we are encouraged to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength. We are encouraged to share the story and commands of God with our children when we are at home, on the road, when we go to bed, and when we are getting up. In short, we are to immerse ourselves in the redemptive narrative of God. The early Hebrews held festivals throughout the year, recounting and celebrating the way God had revealed himself to them as a nation. Similarly, celebrating the various Sundays and seasons of the Christian year is a way to mark time and to emphasize the various aspects of the life of Christ and the story of redemption.

The Seasons of Advent and Christmas

During the season of Advent (the four weeks before Christmas) we remember the first coming of Christ. However, we also anticipate Christ's second advent, his second coming when all things will be made new. Thus, Advent is a season of waiting and is designed to cultivate our awareness of God's actions—past, present, and future. The great proclamation “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14) assures us that God has entered human history through the incarnation of the Son. During Christmas we retell and reorient ourselves around the reality that God put on flesh and walked among us.

Spiritual Practices

In the Gospel of John, Jesus encourages us to “abide” in him and to let his words abide in us (John 15:7). In his letter to the Colossians, the apostle Paul proclaims, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col. 3:16). I encourage you to use this devotional in your personal life, with your family, or with your small group as a means of abiding in Christ and cultivating spiritual practices in your life and in the home. First, read the four **Scripture Readings** and the **Devotion**. Second, engage the Word through the **Questions for Reflection** and the **Prayer of Response**. As you engage God's story each week, I pray that you will be strengthened and encouraged by the good news of great joy!

Paxson Jeancake
Director of Worship | Covenant Church
Advent 2024

First Sunday of Advent (December 1)

Scripture Readings

Jeremiah 33:14-16 | Psalm 25:1-10 | 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 | Luke 21:25-36

Devotion

In the readings for the First Sunday of Advent, we find Scriptures that highlight the first and second comings of Christ. The words from the prophet Jeremiah point to a “righteous Branch” while the Thessalonians are encouraged to “be blameless” before the second coming of the Lord. Jesus also offers words to his disciples regarding the last days and exhorts them to “Be alert at all times.” Thus, as we enter Advent, we remember past realities and anticipate future realities even as we seek to live as faithful followers in the present.

In the first reading from Jeremiah 33, the prophet writes about one who will come from the line of David:

“In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety” (Jeremiah 33:15-16).

Here, the prophet describes the restoration of David’s kingdom and the justice, righteousness, salvation, and safety that this king will bring to his people. Though its inauguration began with Jesus’ first coming, we live in the tension of “the already and not yet” of the kingdom of God. Salvation is here and Christ is King, but the full restoration of all things is still yet to come. This helps to explain why the promise of justice and righteousness is not fully evident today. We can be instruments of these kingdom values on earth, but they will not be perfectly manifested until Christ comes again.

Psalm 25, the psalm of response, reveals one who is waiting on the Lord, which is our posture throughout Advent. In his waiting, the psalmist expresses his personal situation before the Lord:

“To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long” (Psalm 25:1-5).

This, too, should be our prayer during this season, “Teach me your paths and lead me in your truth, O Lord.” Regardless of our circumstances this Advent, we can lift up our souls before the Lord. We can call out to him, naming our guilt, our shame, our idols, our desperation, or whatever ails us. We are invited to enter into relationship with him and to wait on his provision. He is faithful and he is for us.

In the second reading, the apostle Paul describes how the Thessalonians are to live as they wait for the Lord’s second coming. He writes: “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (1 Thessalonians 3:12-13).

As we wait for the second coming of our Lord, we, too, are called to abound in love for one another. We, too, are called to be blameless and to strive for holiness in our present time. We do not consider the Lord’s second coming too often in the course of a normal day. The season of Advent invites us to reflect on these eternal matters and to examine our lives. How are we living today? Are we caught up only in the present, or do we have a longing for our true home? Are we living now in light of the future?

Like the Thessalonians, we are not to become *so* heavenly focused that we neglect our earthly responsibilities; yet, we still need to have our hearts expanded with a view towards the restoration of all things. That vision of God’s kingdom should fuel our days here on earth.

I love the phrase that Paul uses in his prayer, “And may he so *strengthen your hearts in holiness...*” (I Thessalonians 3:13). May the Spirit do that work in us this Advent season. As we linger in the reality of the incarnation, may we desire the things of God more and more. May our souls find rest in Christ alone.

In the Gospel reading from Luke 21, Jesus explains to his disciples the signs of the last days. He taught: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:25-28).

Though this description sounds ominous, it should offer us hope, for when these things take place we will know that our “redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28). For believers, these signs will point to the restoration of all things. Though we are saved and have been redeemed, we still anticipate our final redemption when we will be with the Lord face to face in the new heavens and the new earth. This is the promised redemption Paul speaks about in Romans 8, for which even creation is longing.

Jesus’ final exhortation, like that of the apostle Paul, focuses on how we are to *live* in light of the last days: “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:34-36).

We are not to live complacent lives as we wait for the Lord. On the contrary, we are to live wide awake, fully alive to the spiritual realities of God’s kingdom, here and now.

Advent is our invitation to turn from complacency and apathy and to begin praying for a spirit of expectancy and anticipation of the coming of the kingdom.

Questions for Reflection

1. Jeremiah spoke of the “righteous Branch” who would execute justice and salvation. Why was Jesus not recognized as the fulfillment of this promise by some of his own people? How are we to live as Christ’s ambassadors on earth, bringing the justice and righteousness of his kingdom?

2. In Psalm 25, the psalmist waited on the Lord, seeking his path and his ways. Are you in a similar place this season? Are you waiting and trusting the Lord’s timing as you seek his ways, his path for you? Explain.

3. Paul prayed that the Thessalonians would abound in love for one another and be strengthened in holiness as they wait for the coming of the Lord. Is this a prayer you regularly pray? How might you begin to “abound in love” for the people in your life? How does God strengthen us in holiness (1 Thess. 3:13)?

4. Jesus explained the signs associated with the last days and encouraged the disciples to be on guard so that the worries of this world would not weigh them down. Do you live with a daily vigilance and intentionality regarding your spiritual health? How might a sense of urgency about the second coming influence the way you live each day?

Prayer of Response

Based on 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

Lord Jesus, during this Advent season, fill us with anticipation and direct our way to you. May we, your people, increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. Strengthen our hearts in holiness that we may be blameless before you when you return. Amen.

Second Sunday of Advent (December 8)

Scripture Readings

Malachi 3:1-4 | Luke 1:68-79 | Philippians 1:3-11 | Luke 3:1-6

Devotion

In the readings for the Second Sunday of Advent, our attention is focused on John the Baptist who heralds the coming Messiah. Malachi and Luke inform our hearts and minds as to John's ministry. The apostle Paul served as a herald of the good news to the Gentiles. His letter to the Philippians speaks of how we are to live in light of Christ's return.

In the first reading from Malachi 3, we hear that a "messenger" will prepare the way for the Lord: "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 3:1).

Malachi wrote in the sixth century B.C., in the time of the second temple. The messenger he describes is understood to be John the Baptist who preached about the coming Messiah and who offered a baptism of repentance to prepare the hearts of God's people. During the time of Malachi's prophecy, the people of God were waiting for the Lord to fill the temple as he had in former days. We know that Christ would describe *himself* as the temple (John 2:19-22), and the apostle John would describe Jesus as the one who "tabernacled" among us (John 1:14). The anticipation of a glory-filled temple would not be in the way God's people expected. Divine presence would come in the person of Christ.

Malachi further describes the messenger and his role: He writes: "For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness" (Malachi 3:2-3).

Part of the role of this messenger is to “refine” the people of God. He is speaking of a transformation of the heart and a pursuit of holiness. This is part of the mission of the messenger who will prepare the way for the Lord. John the Baptist fulfilled this role as he directed God’s people toward repentance and the pursuit of holiness.

Rather than a *psalm* of response to the first reading, the lectionary calls for a canticle, also known as Zechariah’s song. In Luke 1, we hear Zechariah’s prophecy (or song), praising the Lord for his son (John the Baptist). Zechariah sang over this little child, saying: “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins” (Luke 1:76-77).

What a moment this must have been for Zechariah to express his joy and wonder about this child who would prepare the coming of the Lord. This is the same man who could not speak throughout Elizabeth’s pregnancy because he doubted the word of the Lord concerning his son. It wasn’t until the eighth day after John was born, on the day he was circumcised, that the Lord opened Zechariah’s mouth, and he was able to speak. First, he declared the child’s name would be John, and then he gave this prophecy about him.

Zechariah also declared promises about the coming of the Lord: “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:78-79).

Zechariah was promising the people of God that light was about to break into the darkness. The Messiah would guide his people “into the way of peace.” These gospel promises would surely have brought hope to God’s people. The apostle John would further affirm the themes of light and darkness in his Gospel (John 1:5).

The second reading from Philippians 1 offers teaching from the apostle Paul on how to live in light of Christ's second coming. Paul speaks into a life of love and righteousness. He writes: "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God" (Philippians 1:9-11).

Paul is praying that these believers would be full of love for one another and that they would be growing in knowledge and insight. Love and knowledge go hand in hand in Paul's mind. Both inform one another. Love without knowledge is often empty, and knowledge without love is often prideful. We are to be growing in both together. This is how we are to live as we anticipate the Lord's return. We don't become complacent, but we are always striving towards holiness and righteousness.

In the Gospel reading from Luke 3, the ministry of John the Baptist is highlighted. After placing John right in the middle of the political and religious rulers of the day, Luke writes: "He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3).

By naming the Roman and Jewish leaders, Luke set the context for someone who would shake up the various authorities of the day. John the Baptist prepared the way for the one who would be our great high priest and our true King. Luke recalled the prophecy of Isaiah and announced that through John: "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Luke 3:5-6).

John the Baptist helped to smooth the path for the Lamb of God. He began a refining and softening work in the hearts of God's people so that they could see "the salvation of God." May our hearts be open this Advent season to see and hear afresh the message of salvation.

Questions for Reflection

1. Malachi's prophecy came about five hundred years before the birth of John the Baptist. How does prophetic fulfillment affect the way you view Scripture? Malachi spoke of the coming messenger's work as a "refiner's fire." How did John the Baptist fulfill this role? How does the Lord refine our hearts today?

2. Zechariah's prophecy (song) in Luke 1 spoke of God remembering his covenant (Luke 1:72) and of bringing light into darkness (Luke 1:79). How did Jesus fulfill these roles? How does the idea of covenant inform your relationship with the Lord? Is God exposing the darkness in your heart this Advent season? Describe.

3. Paul spoke of the Philippians growing in both love and knowledge as they wait for the Lord's return. Are you growing in both of these areas? Do love and knowledge tend to complement or work against each other in your experience? Explain. How does Paul see these working together in a believer's life?

4. Luke set the context for John the Baptist by naming the rulers of the day. How does the gospel challenge the rulers and principles of our world today? How does the gospel challenge the idols of our hearts? John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord, making the path level. How is the Spirit at work in your heart, making the crooked places straight and the rough places smooth?

Prayer of Response

Based on Philippians 3:6, 9-11

Sovereign God, we know that you, who began a good work in us, will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. May our love overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help us to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ we may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. Amen.

Third Sunday of Advent (December 15)

Scripture Readings

Zephaniah 3:14-20 | Isaiah 12:2-6 | Philippians 4:4-7 | Luke 3:7-18

Devotion

In the readings for the Third Sunday of Advent, we continue to highlight the ministry of John the Baptist who points to the one who will baptize with the “Holy Spirit and fire.” The prophet Zephaniah offers hope and points to the God who “rejoices” over his people with love. The apostle Paul calls the church to “Rejoice in the Lord always” and to know that the Lord is near. Thus, the themes of joy and rejoicing in the reality of the Lord being near are prominent in the readings.

In the first reading from Zephaniah 3, the prophet offers hope to the people of God. Zephaniah was written in the seventh century B.C. during the early reign of King Josiah. Though judgment is a prominent theme in Zephaniah, the book concludes with a song of joy: “The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing” (Zephaniah 3:17).

The Lord promises love to his people. Though he is just, he is merciful. He will rejoice over, renew, and exult over his people. Though we fall short and disobey the Lord in countless ways, he continues to pursue us and even sings over us as our Redeemer. This message should inform our fears and anxieties. Our God is full of mercy and kindness towards us, his unfaithful people.

Isaiah 12 serves as the response to the first reading. Here, the prophet exhorts God’s people to express joy in response to the Lord’s strength and salvation.

“Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.
Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel” (Isaiah 12:2-6).

Singing continues in this passage as the prophet calls for the people to “shout aloud” and “sing for joy.” Such expression is not meant to just stir up emotion; rather, it is the natural response to recounting and recalling the mighty deeds of the Lord. With a little reflection, God’s people would remember all the various ways the Lord had rescued and saved them. Some scholars believe that Isaiah is intentionally trying to recapture the joy of the exodus in this song.

We, too, should sing our praises with joy in recounting the many ways God has rescued and saved us. Taking the time to ponder and recall God’s intervention in our lives should fill us with a sense of gratitude. In those moments, joyful song may be the best way to express our love and adoration. Many of the Christmas carols speak into the sense of joy and wonder we sense when we ponder God’s mighty works and deeds (e.g., “Joy to the World,” “O Come, All Ye Faithful”).

In the second reading from Philippians 4, the apostle Paul continues this theme of joy and exhorts God’s people to “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4). Paul speaks of the nearness of the Lord, implying that his return could be at any moment. Such expectation should cause the Philippians (and all of us) to be filled with joy. In fact, in light of this reality, Paul speaks into our fears and concerns, writing: “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

Paul is writing from prison, yet he is full of joy himself. How is this possible? Only the work of grace within us can lead to such an outlook and inner peace.

This peace will “guard” our hearts and minds. Our prayers can give us a fresh perspective on any given situation in our lives. Even something as bleak as imprisonment need not keep us from joy and thanksgiving. This Advent, may the peace of God guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Whatever your situation, bring it to the Lord in prayer and ask him for his presence and for his perspective on your circumstances. The promise of Advent and Christmas is that the Lord is near. God is with us.

In the Gospel reading from Luke 3, the ministry of John the Baptist is highlighted. As the people wondered if John might be the Messiah, he spoke these words: “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:16-17).

John’s ministry was to prepare the way for Jesus. In this passage, he takes the attention off of himself and points to the one who will baptize with the “Holy Spirit and fire.” John makes it clear that the one coming is more powerful than he is. In fact, John is not even worthy to “untie the thong of his sandals.”

In a culture in which so many are seeking their own fame, John the Baptist stands out as a messenger whose role is to diminish! Speaking of Jesus, John said, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

John was clear on his role and it was to point to the Messiah. Sometimes we get fuzzy about our role and think our job is to increase. Our role is for others to see the light of Christ within us. We are not pointing people to ourselves, but to Christ. This Advent season, may we learn to humble ourselves and be grateful for all that God has done. Like John, may we proclaim the good news of the gospel to those around us. May we sing with joy and know the peace of God, no matter our circumstances, for the Lord is near. God is with us.

Questions for Reflection

1. Zephaniah speaks of how the Lord rejoices over us with gladness, renews us in his love, and exults over us with loud singing. Does this seem like poetic hyperbole to you? Does it seem too good to be true? Do you have trouble believing the Lord loves you as much as he says he does? Explain.
2. Isaiah also speaks of singing with joy in light of God's mighty deeds. Why is singing such a common commandment in Scripture? Why is it such a powerful form of expression? (See Colossians 3:15-17, for example) Do you regularly recount and recall the way God has worked in your life?
3. Though in prison, the apostle Paul seems to be full of joy and exhorts the Philippians to "Rejoice in the Lord always." I imagine that, for many people, the word "always" may be a bit troublesome and confusing. How are we to rejoice *always*? What truth do we need to believe *more than* the circumstances that may be causing fear and worry in our hearts? What activity often changes our perspective?
4. John the Baptist was clear on his mission and ministry. He was to point to the one greater than himself. Do you get things reversed in your own life? Even in ways that may be unintentional, do you bring more attention to yourself than to Christ? Explain.

Prayer of Response

Based on Zephaniah 3:14-17

Loving God, during this Advent season, help us to sing aloud, and rejoice in you with full and gracious hearts. We know that you have taken away the judgments against us, and that you are in our midst. When fears overcome us, may we remember that you delight in us with gladness; that you quiet us with your love; that you rejoice over us with singing. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Advent (December 22)

Scripture Readings

Micah 5:2-5A | Psalm 80:1-7 | Hebrews 10:5-10 | Luke 1:39-55

Devotion

In the readings for this Sunday we hear the prophecy from Micah that a shepherd-king will come from the town of Bethlehem. We hear the song that Mary sings during her visit with her cousin Elizabeth. The author of Hebrews connects the incarnation with Jesus' obedience and the act of offering his body for the atonement of our sins. The readings thus connect the cradle and the cross, the incarnation with the crucifixion.

In the first reading from Micah 5, we read about the role that the little town of Bethlehem will play in the story of redemption.

“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel” (Micah 5:2-3).

It is amazing how accurate these prophecies are, spanning hundreds of years until their fulfillment. Micah, written during the eighth century B.C., points to the town of Bethlehem as the cradle of the coming Messiah. The prophecy also speaks of “she who is in labor.” The role of Mary is already declared in this prophecy, hundreds of years before she is pregnant with Jesus. This should astound us and fill us with faith with regard to inerrancy of God's Word and his plan of salvation. Truly, he holds all things together and works out his sovereign plan from generation to generation.

The psalm of response also speaks of the Shepherd who will lead God's people:

“Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!” (Psalm 80:1-2).

The psalmist sings of this coming ruler who will save his people, care for them, and lead them. The psalmist uses the refrain “Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved” (Psalm 80:3, 7) to reinforce the plea and the prayer of God’s people. It is thought that this psalm was likely written during the same period as Micah, during the reign of Hezekiah and the threat of the Assyrians (between 734 and 722 B.C.). God’s people were crying out for protection and salvation. God would ultimately respond by sending his Son to restore and redeem his people, not from an Assyrian army, but from sin and death.

The second reading from Hebrews 10 connects the incarnation and the cross. Christ was born to die. In obedience to the Father’s plan, the Son took on flesh so that he could die in our place, only to rise on the third day to bring us life! The author of Hebrews quotes Jesus quoting from Psalm 40:6: “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’ (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)” (Hebrews 10:5-7).

Jesus fulfilled the Father’s will by offering his body on the cross for the atonement of our sins. “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4). Jesus’ once for all sacrifice was God’s plan from the beginning. Thus, his birth was the means to bring about our redemption.

During Advent and Christmas, we have one eye on the nativity and another eye on the cross. The only way Jesus could fulfill his mission was to become one of us. This is the profound reality of the incarnation, the first step in destroying death.

The Gospel reading from Luke 1 gives us a window into the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary. When Mary arrived at her home, Elizabeth, filled with the Spirit, spoke these words over her relative:

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord” (Luke 1:42-45).

Elizabeth shares the detail that her son, John the Baptist, “leaped for joy” in the womb when Mary arrived. What an amazing time it must have been for Mary and Elizabeth. These women were pregnant with sons who would play a role in the redemption of God’s people. One would prepare the way for the Messiah; one would *be* the Messiah for his people.

Mary’s song is one of profound gratitude for God’s blessing, his covenantal love, and his kingdom reversals: “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever” (Luke 1:51-55).

Mary sings for all of us in a way. She expresses the covenantal love of God and his heart for the poor and lowly. We all long for things to be made right and for justice to prevail. During this Advent season, Mary’s song reminds us that one day all things will be made new. What began in Bethlehem will finally be fulfilled in the new Jerusalem. On that day, all the powers of the earth will be brought down once and for all, and our triune God will be with us forever.

Questions for Reflection

1. Throughout Advent we read many prophecies that find their fulfillment in the birth of Christ. Why do you think God chose Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Savior of the world? Is this in keeping with the character of God?
2. The psalmist sings a refrain of salvation in Psalm 80, "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved." What meaning did this have for God's people during the days of the psalmist? What meaning does this refrain have for us today? Though we don't have an Assyrian army threatening us, what spiritual forces do we face in our lives today?
3. Why was Jesus born in Bethlehem centuries ago? According to the author of Hebrews, how did Jesus answer that question? (Hebrews 10:5-7). Why did Jesus have to take on flesh and become one of us? How are we to live our lives as an offering to God?
4. The interaction between Mary and Elizabeth is tender, profound, and Spirit-filled. Similar to the first question above, why would God choose a lowly virgin to bring about his cosmic plan of salvation? What are the themes within Mary's song? How does she sing for all of us? Do her words bring you hope this Advent season?

Prayer of Response

Based on Luke 1:46-55; Psalm 80:3

Redeeming Lord, may our souls magnify you alone; may our spirits rejoice in God our Savior. Your mercy is for those who fear you from generation to generation. You have brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; you have filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. Restore us, O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

First Sunday after Christmas (December 29)

Scripture Readings

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26 | Psalm 148 | Colossians 3:12-17 | Luke 2:41-52

Devotion

In the readings for the First Sunday after Christmas, we see the connections between the young Samuel and the young Jesus. Both ministered in the Lord's house and both grew in divine favor. The apostle Paul exhorts us to "let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts." These themes will be explored in the devotion and applied to our lives in the questions for reflection.

The first reading allows us space to reflect on the young Samuel and to find parallels between his life and the life of the young Jesus. Samuel's mother Hannah was barren for some years. She prayed fervently to the Lord out of desperation, and the Lord heard her prayer and she gave birth to Samuel. In her prayer, she promised to offer her child to the Lord as a nazirite (1 Samuel 1:11).

After Samuel was weaned, Hannah and her husband Elkanah offered Samuel to Eli, the priest in the tabernacle at Shiloh. Once a year Hannah and Elkanah would return to the sanctuary of the Lord to offer sacrifices. On each visit, she would give Samuel a new ephod. Like Mary, Hannah thanked and praised the Lord for Samuel (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Both prayers speak of kingdom reversals (2 Samuel 2:8; Luke 1:52-53). Both women knew their sons belonged to the Lord. Like Jesus, Samuel ministered and spent time in the house of the Lord. Also like Jesus, Samuel "continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people" (1 Samuel 2:26).

The psalm of response, Psalm 148, is appropriate for this season as we celebrate the reality that salvation has come to the whole world; light has dawned on all creation.

All creation offers its response to the King of kings and Lord of lords.

“Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the Lord!” (Psalm 148:13-14).

This is our call to worship for this First Sunday after Christmas, a call to “praise the name of the Lord for his name alone is exalted.” Praise is the most appropriate response before the child who is our Savior, the Word made flesh. We can join our voices this Christmas season with all of creation in wonder and adoration of God our Maker and our Redeemer.

The second reading from Colossians 3 speaks to how we are to live in light of God’s salvation. In the early church, newly baptized Christians were clothed in new, white garments. In the epistle reading for today, the apostle Paul exhorts us to clothe ourselves “with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Colossians 3:12). No longer are we to fit ourselves with the old nature; we are to clothe ourselves with the character of Christ. This is much easier said than done!

We are to bear with one another and forgive one another. Moreover, Paul says, “Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Colossians 3:14). Love is to be our primary garment. Love is what holds everything together. Without love (Paul says elsewhere), we are like “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1).

We can do a lot in the name of the Lord, but if we do not have love in our hearts for other people, it is all in vain. We have to wear the love of Christ. After this exhortation to clothe ourselves with Christ, Paul then concludes this portion of his letter with a list of activities for us to display as those growing in Christ-likeness:

“And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:14-17).

Paul leaves no stone unturned! As Christ’s followers, we are to be a people who seek peace; who are thankful; who let the word dwell in them richly; who teach and admonish one another; who sing to one another with grateful hearts; and who give thanks in everything! Though we inevitably fall short, we strive to clothe ourselves in the character of Christ and to seek this way of life. During this Christmas season and beyond, may we be this kind of people.

In the Gospel reading from Luke 2, we find Jesus and his family on an annual pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem for Passover. After celebrating the festival they began to head back home to Nazareth. After a day’s journey they realized that the young Jesus was not with them. They travel back to Jerusalem and find Jesus in the temple. After asking Jesus why he would treat his parents in this way, the boy responds: “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49).

Luke gives us the detail that Mary “treasured all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:51). Since Luke interviewed eyewitnesses to write his Gospel account (Luke 1:3), it is likely that Luke received this account about losing Jesus from Mary herself. Mary pondered Jesus’ response and all that took place. I’m sure she must have reflected a lot on that phrase, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

Like Samuel, Jesus grew “in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (Luke 2:52). In God’s plan, he sent his son to born like us and to grow and learn and develop in godly wisdom.

Though himself divine, he grew in divine and human favor. Like Mary, may we ponder and treasure all things these in our hearts this Christmas season.

Questions for Reflection

1. The young Samuel grew in favor with the Lord and with people. If you have children, how are you raising them in the Lord? Are your children learning the things of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ? As a follower of Christ, are you still growing in the Lord or have you become stagnant? Explain.

3. Do you clothe yourself in the character of Christ each day? Explain. In Colossians 3:12-17, Paul offers much in terms of how we are to live as followers of Christ. Which verbs stick out to you in his list (teach, admonish, sing, etc.)? What binds all of these various traits together? Why is this trait so important?

4. Describe how you think Joseph and Mary felt when they realized they had lost Jesus. What do you think Jesus meant when he said, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" How does this narrative color your understanding of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph? As you have walked with Jesus over the years, are there things that you, like Mary, have treasured in your heart? Explain.

Prayer of Renewal

Based on Colossians 3:15-17

Holy God, let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, and help us to be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in us richly; help us to teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in our hearts, may we sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to you. And whatever we do, in word or deed, may we do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to you, our Father, through him.

Second Sunday after Christmas (January 5)

Scripture Readings

Jeremiah 31:7-14 , 26 | Psalm 147:12-20 | Ephesians 1:3-14 | John 1:1-18

Devotion

The beauty of the lectionary lies in its invitation to linger in the season of Christmas. Rather than celebrating one day and then quickly moving on, we are given an extended period, twelve days to ponder the mystery and the wonder of the incarnation. In the readings for this Second Sunday after Christmas, we hear about the restoration of God's people and the "shepherd" who will lead them back home. We hear of the many spiritual blessing we have in Christ and of the Word that was made flesh and lived among us. These themes will be explored in our devotion.

In the first reading from Jeremiah 31, we hear of the promise of restoration of God's people. The prophet Jeremiah ministered in the time before and during the exile to Babylon. In this section of his writing, Jeremiah speaks of the promise that those who were sent away shall return home. He writes: "Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, 'He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.' For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him" (Jeremiah 31:10-11).

God will once again gather his people as a shepherd gathers his flock. This will be a mix of people, the blind the lame, and those weeping. Jeremiah writes: "See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn" (Jeremiah 31:8-9).

This return will be for those from all walks of life. And they will be grieving their loss, their trauma, and their exile. God will guide them, however, and sustain them. He will guide them to brooks of water and will not let them stumble. He will sustain them on their journey and provide for their needs to ensure they make it back home. The reality of the exile made its mark on the people of God. It was devastating and traumatic for them as a people, but God restored them as he restores us. Though he is just, he is merciful and his faithful love endures forever.

In the psalm of response (Psalm 147:12-20), the psalmist sings of God's provision for his people.

“For he strengthens the bars of your gates; he blesses your children within you. He grants peace within your borders; he fills you with the finest of wheat” (Psalm 147:13-14).

Jeremiah spoke of the promise of restoration; the psalmist praises God for his blessings, his peace, and his provision. Overall, this psalm speaks of the sovereign power of our God, but also of his special relationship with the nation of Israel. Though the mystery of the gospel would be revealed at the coming of Jesus and the invitation would extend to all nations, at this time in redemptive history, the psalmist recognized the unique relationship God had with this one nation.

In the second reading from Ephesians 1, the apostle Paul reminds us of the many spiritual blessings we have in Christ.

“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:7-10).

Here we read of the redemption and forgiveness that are ours in Christ; however, Paul also alludes to the “mystery” of God’s will, that people from all nations (not just Israel) are part of God’s family. By faith in Christ, we have become children of God. We have been given an inheritance as the adopted sons and daughters of God. Moreover, we have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit.

“In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:13-14).

The Holy Spirit marks us as God’s children, his people. And now we have the person of the Holy Spirit to direct us and guide us. We live in light of his power and advocacy each and every day.

The Gospel reading from John 1 further reveals God’s plan from the beginning. John writes: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:1-5).

The wonder of Christmas is that God, who is eternal, stepped into time and became one of us. In becoming one of us, he began his mission of making all things new. Moreover, for Israel, God’s glory was made manifest in the tabernacle and the temple. With the advent of Christ, God’s glory was made known in the Son. John declared, “we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Christmas brings us face to face with the glory of God, no longer in a place, but in a person. And we long to behold him as the shepherds once did; as the wise men did; as Joseph and Mary once did. For now, we long for that day and pray, “Come, Lord Jesus.”

Questions for Reflection

1. Jeremiah offered hope for God's people that, though exiled, he would lead them home as a shepherd. Though God may lead us into times of trial, do you believe that he is our Good Shepherd who always extends mercy and care to his people? Have you experienced a time of "exile" or trial in your life? Did you experience God's presence and provision during that time?

2. Psalm 147 sings of God's sovereign power and provision. Referencing verses 16-18, take a moment to comment on the many aspects of God's sovereign power in creation. In light of this, can you trust him for his sovereign power and provision in your own life? Explain.

3. The apostle Paul enumerates our many spiritual blessings in Christ. Name some of these blessings. What does it mean to you that you have been adopted as a child of God?

4. The prologue to John's gospel is poetic and profound. What does John mean by identifying Jesus as "the Word"? How does John try to explain the eternal nature of Jesus, the Word? What is so significant about Jesus taking on flesh and living among us? How do we encounter the glory of God today?

Prayer of Response

Based on John 1:1-5, 12, 14

Lord Jesus, you were in the beginning as the Word, with God, as God. All things came into being through your mighty power, and without your presence not one thing came into being. We praise you for you are life and the light of all people. Your light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. In your mercy, you became flesh and lived among us; and we offer our lives to you, for by your power we have become children of God. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

