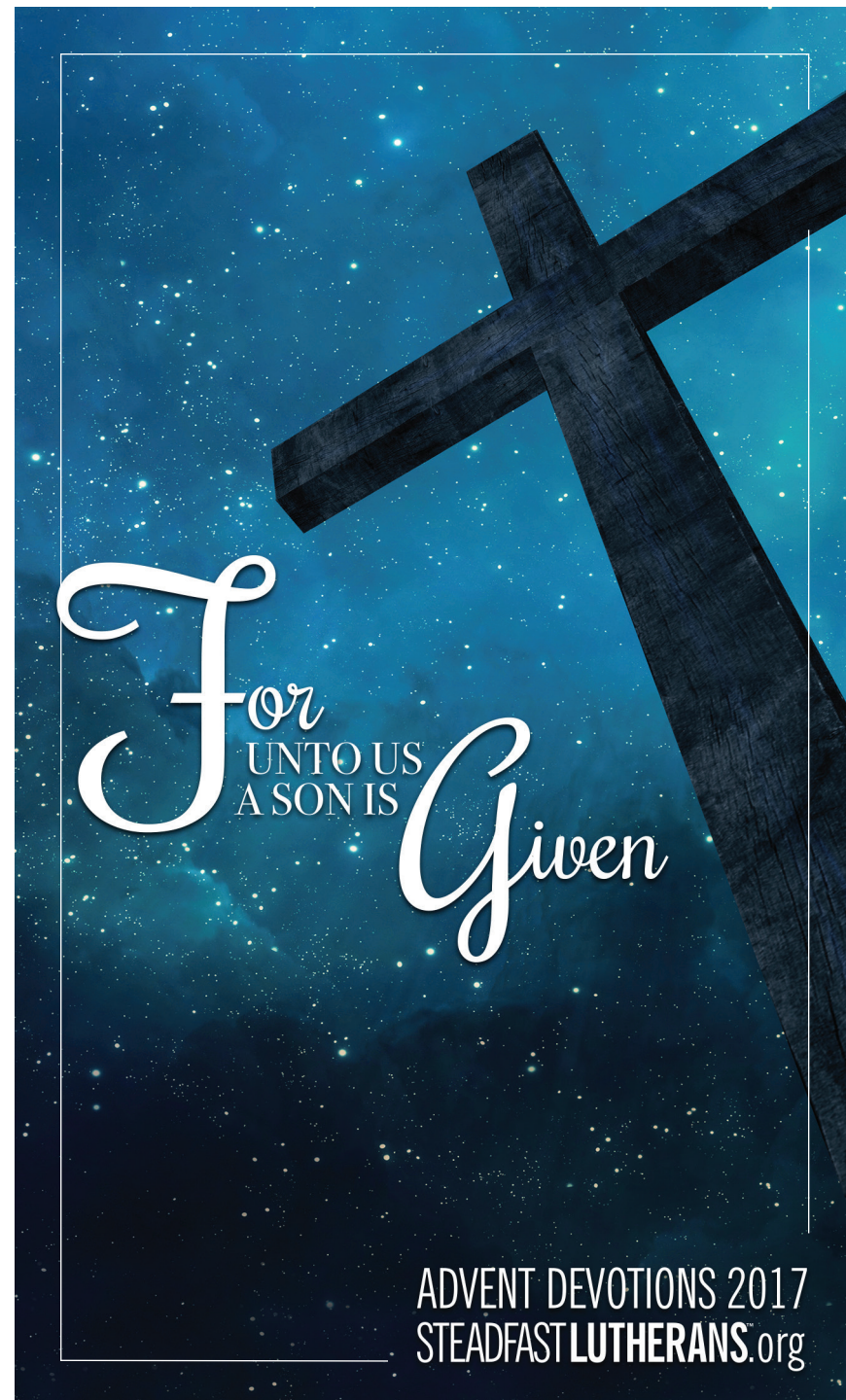




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“For Unto Us a Son is Given”

Advent Devotions

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The gift of a son named Isaac was announced to Abraham and Sarah. The gift of Samuel was announced to Hannah. The gift of John was announced to Zechariah. But the gift of Jesus was not only announced to Mary and Joseph, but to shepherds and wise men from the East, to Jew and Gentile alike.

For the Christ Child was born not just to Mary and Joseph, but to us. To us the Son of God was given. This good news of great joy is for all people: Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. What was promised to the human race when it consisted of only two people is fulfilled for all their sons and daughters. Jesus Christ is the Savior of all mankind, who bore the world's sin on the cross and made atonement by His precious blood. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses.

God still sends His messengers to you to proclaim the good news of Jesus. This Christmas season (and always) attend the Divine Service, hear the Word of the Lord, and receive the Sacrament of the Altar. For through these means of grace Jesus Christ is yours, and you remain His now and forevermore.

Unto you a Son is given; He is Jesus Christ, the Lord.

We praise You, Jesus, on this Christmas day, for You were born to us to save us from our sins and to give us life everlasting. Amen.

The Nativity of Our Lord—Christmas Day

“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’”

Luke 2:8–14



Joseph assumed what anybody else would have assumed in that situation: the woman to whom he had been betrothed committed adultery with another man and became pregnant. Being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, Joseph resolves not to have her stoned, as would have been his right according to the Law of Moses; instead he resolves to divorce her quietly.

But the angel of the Lord appeared to him and announced the good news that the Child in Mary's womb was from the Holy Spirit. He is Immanuel, God with us, who had come to save His people from their sins. And with this Word of God another great miracle takes place: Joseph believes. He does not deny what was said, nor does he doubt and question how he might know this, like Zechariah did. Instead, he simply did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took Mary as his wife.

The idea of a virgin conceiving and bearing a Son is no more unbelievable today than it was in Joseph's day. Rather than relying on human reason or experience, follow the example of Joseph, who heard the Word of the Lord and believed it, and so was justified.

Almighty God, send Your Holy Spirit through Your Word, that I would not doubt what You have spoken, but believe it unto eternal life. Amen.

The Nativity of Our Lord—Christmas Eve

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us).”

Matthew 1:18–23

*For the
Evangelical Lutheran Church
wherever she may be found*

And for the Glory of God

First Sunday in Advent

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”

Isaiah 9:6–7

This Advent devotion is titled “For unto us a Son is given” mimicking the language of this passage from Isaiah, who short of John the Baptizer, is the quintessential Advent preacher. Advent is filled with lessons from Isaiah, as God spoke through him to reveal much about the coming of Christ Jesus into the flesh.

You will notice that the graphic for this volume plays on two words of the Isaiah passage, “for” and “given”. This is of course because the whole message of the Scripture is God’s work of salvation, the forgiveness of our sins. This is the task of the Son of God, whose incarnation we will celebrate with great joy in just a few weeks.

Therefore Jesus, son of Mary, is not the last in a series of miraculous sons, but rather the only-begotten Son of God, promised first to Adam and Eve in the Garden, and promised throughout the centuries that followed through the prophets. In Him alone, the incarnate Deity, is salvation won for all mankind. For as true Man, born of the Virgin Mary, Jesus died as our perfect substitute; as true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, Jesus’ death avails for the sins of the whole world. No other son could make satisfaction for our sins. Only Christ, true God and man, could do that. And so He has.

Blessed Jesus, Son of God and Son of Mary, You alone are my salvation. I rejoice and give thanks that You were born for me. Amen.

The Third Saturday in Advent

“And the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’”

Luke 1:30–33

Throughout the centuries the Lord had blessed His people with miraculous conceptions: Isaac was given to Abraham and Sarah, Samuel to Elkanah and Hannah, John to Zechariah and Elizabeth. And there are still others whom we have not considered this Advent season: Jacob and Esau, Joseph, and Samson.

Yet in every case, the son conceived in his mother’s womb was conceived according to the natural order. Yes, the Lord opened the wombs of the aged and barren, but the child was conceived when the husband knew his wife according to God’s design.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, apart from the natural way of things, without human father. The Holy Spirit came upon His mother, and the power of the Most High overshadowed her; therefore the child born is called holy — the Son of God.

The goal of this little devotional booklet will be to use three miraculous sons of the times prior to Jesus — Isaac, Samuel, and John the Baptizer to demonstrate our Lord’s faithfulness to keep His promises to us, for our sake, so we would be forgiven. Each of these miraculous sons can be used to paint a picture of the Son of God who came to serve. May your devotions continue to bring the good news of your forgiveness for the sake of Christ as we move through this season of celebrating that our Lord has come, still comes in His Word and Sacrament, and will come again on the Last Day.

Dear Jesus, bless our Advent season with Your Word. Remind us over and over again of Your faithfulness that we may endure all things in this life in a fallen world. Amen.

First Monday in Advent

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.’ Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, ‘I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.’”

Genesis 3:15; 4:1

The first birth in Scripture is considered by the first parents to be quite miraculous. All life is a gift of God, but in Eve’s declaration of receiving a man with the help of the Lord she was zealously misapplying the promise of the Offspring (Christ) to her firstborn son Cain.

Eve understood the Fall and the effects of Original Sin. She had the promise of God to be delivered from this fallen world. She thought her son Cain would be the one to deliver her and Adam. She was mistaken about the person, but not about the Lord’s faithfulness to fulfill the promise He gave to both her and Adam, and thus to all humanity.

Think about times in your life where you were so certain that you knew exactly what should happen but it didn’t. Think about times when you wanted something to happen immediately. Now think of a time when God had other, better plans for your life. This is a good reminder for us during Advent.

By all appearances, it was a rather dishonorable end for John the Baptist. He whose birth was foretold by an angel, who came in the spirit and power of Elijah, to whom Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to be baptized by him, now died because of the foolish vow of the king and the bloodthirsty desire of his queen.

Yet Jesus does not consider such a death dishonorable. He says, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Though John’s life was worthless in the eyes of Herod, his death was precious in the sight of the Lord.

Our Lord Jesus Himself was not ashamed to suffer such a dishonorable death — hanged between two criminals, naked, battered, bruised, mocked and abused before the crowds. For by His death Christ has raised us from our dishonorable state to the glories of heaven. Now John enjoys the blessed presence of his Savior Jesus Christ in heaven, awaiting the resurrection of his body on the Last Day. By grace alone, so will you.

Lord Jesus Christ, make me bold to confess You regardless of cost, knowing that for Your sake I am blessed now and forever. Amen.

The Third Friday in Advent

“And [Herod] vowed to her, ‘Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom.’ And she went out and said to her mother, ‘For what should I ask?’ And she said, ‘The head of John the Baptist.’ And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, ‘I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.’ And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.”

Mark 6:23–29

The promise that we still are waiting for is the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. At the close of the last Church Year we heard about preparing for our Lord’s return, caring for the faith we have been given by hearing the Word and receiving the Sacrament. These things make us ready and prepared (believing) for when Jesus comes again in glory. We see the same signs that Jesus spoke of millennia ago, but have the Word which is more sure. Our Lord is not absentminded in keeping His promises any more than He was for Eve. In the fullness of time He sent forth His Son born of Mary to redeem the world. He will also come soon just as He said.

Lord Jesus, we give You thanks that you are faithful in keeping Your Word. Grant us to trust Your promises and look forward to Your coming. Help us to be faithful in our reception of Your Word and Sacraments. Amen.

First Tuesday in Advent

“After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: ‘Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’ But Abram said, ‘O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ And Abram said, ‘Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.’ And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: ‘This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.’ And he brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”

Genesis 15:1–6

John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, was so identified with his work of baptizing that he came to be known as the Baptist. Yet it was not long after his ministry at the Jordan River began that Jesus became more popular among the people: “Look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” (Not that Jesus himself baptized, but his disciples baptized in His Name.)

How could John rightly be called the Baptist when his cousin, through His disciples, quickly performed far more baptisms? John is rightly called the Baptist because his preaching and baptizing bore witness to the One who was to come: Jesus Christ. John was never meant to be the center of attention; rather, he was always meant to draw attention to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Isaiah prophesied that he would prepare the way of the Lord. The angel Gabriel said that he would go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to make ready for Him a people prepared. His own father sang to him at his birth, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways.” Therefore, John’s ministry is still being carried out today when you look to the One who came after him in faith, confessing Him to be your Savior and Lord.

Almighty God, may I behold only Your Son, Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away my sin. Amen.

The Third Thursday in Advent

“Now a discussion arose between some of John’s disciples and a Jew over purification. And they came to John and said to him, ‘Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness — look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.’ John answered, ‘A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.”

John 3:25–30

The final words of this passage are some of the most beautiful words in all of Scripture. We ought to treasure them, for they are the same words believed by Adam, Noah, Abraham, David, and all pious Christians from the beginning of time.

Faith in Christ has always been the way of salvation for sinners. It was that way for Adam who had to trust in the promised Offspring. It was that way for Noah who was righteous just like Abraham. It is the same for us today. Faith in Christ, believing in the LORD reckons the righteousness of the LORD upon the believer. God sees the believer in Christ differently.

Abraham looked forward to Christ’s day and rejoiced. He saw the crucifixion, the vicarious atonement — that God would come to save His people and do the work of their salvation — shedding His blood, suffering the punishment in place of sinners, and taking away the sin of the world. He saw the resurrection of Christ as well, that He would be raised for our justification.

This great saving work of Jesus is reckoned to a person when the believe in Christ for their salvation, for the forgiveness of sins. You are righteous in God’s eyes because of Jesus, just like Abraham.

Lord Jesus, we give You thanks for Your suffering, death, and resurrection. As Abraham looked forward to Your day, help us to remember Your work for us and for our salvation. Grant us faith to trust Your Word as it comes to us at Church and in our devotions. Amen.

First Wednesday in Advent

“The LORD said, ‘I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.’ And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?’ The LORD said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.’”

Genesis 18:10–14

At the beginning of the prayer offices of Matins and Vespers, the church quotes Psalm 51:15: “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise.” Zechariah had waited a long time for his lips to be opened — nine months, to be exact. When the Lord opened his lips, what else could Zechariah’s mouth declare except His praise?

And the content of Zechariah’s song of praise is not his own son, but rather God’s Son, Jesus Christ. As joyous as the occasion of John’s birth was for Zechariah, more joyous was the knowledge that John’s birth marked the time of the Lord’s visitation and redemption of His people. Now that the Christ was to be born, as had been foretold throughout the centuries, God would save His people from their enemies, that they would serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all their days.

The Son of God has done this for you too. He became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and was born of the Virgin Mary to save you from your enemies: sin, death, and the devil. Having been delivered from these enemies, you now live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. By His Word and Sacrament, He has opened your lips. Now, like Zechariah long ago, your mouth declares His praise.

Blessed are You, O Lord, for You have shown mercy to us by sending Your Son to deliver us. May our mouths always show forth your praise. Amen.

The Third Wednesday in Advent

“And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, ‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.’”

Luke 1:67–75

Abraham laughed at the promise of Isaac, likely from the joy that God was going to fulfill the promise soon (Genesis 17). He had heard that promise years before but had to endure not seeing any sign of fulfillment from the Lord. Sarah is first introduced in Genesis as being barren, and that pattern had also continued. There was great temptation to give up on the promise. The Lord was faithful to them in everything to produce this miraculous son, named for the laughter of both his father and mother — laughter produced from both joy and from weakness of faith.

God will bring about His promises and He will do so through these righteous saints — righteous not because of their conduct but because of their faith in the coming Son Christ — faith which is counted to them both as righteousness.

Is anything too hard for the Lord? This season is often filled with much worry and anxiety. There is no shortage of struggles in this life. If God can bring forth a son from old Abraham and Sarah, and then later Himself assume human flesh in the womb of a virgin — are your struggles too hard for the Lord? He is faithful to you according to His Word.

Lord Jesus, You are no stranger to suffering and struggle. You endured much for our sake. Grant us joy in all of our struggles and faith no matter the situation. Help us to place our hope in You for all things. Amen.

First Thursday in Advent

“The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, ‘God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.’”

Genesis 21:1–6

God is faithful to His promises. He gave this miraculous son Isaac. Faithful Abraham and Sarah received the child named for laughter with great joy. Abraham showed the fruit of faith in two ways, by calling the son Isaac as God had said and by circumcising Isaac as commanded by God in Genesis 17. Sarah bore fruit of faith as well, having joy and confessing that joy before the world. God had been faithful to them. He kept His promise. Isaac would be the chosen son to inherit the covenant and promise of the lineage of Christ.

“He shall be called John.” Elizabeth instructed all her neighbors and relatives who had come to celebrate God’s gift of a son to her in her old age. This confounded them. After all, she and Zechariah had waited so long to have a child of their own; shouldn’t that child be named in honor of his father?

“His name is John,” wrote Zechariah. Though he had waited so many years for a son of his own flesh and blood to be born to him, he set aside the honor of his own name in order that God’s Name would be glorified. God, through the angel Gabriel, had given this child the name John, which means “The Lord has shown favor.” And so He did by blessing Zechariah and Elizabeth with this boy.

By faith, Zechariah knew that the favor shown by the Lord far surpassed whatever honor he could claim for himself. In naming the child John, Zechariah exemplified what the Lord Jesus would later say: “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

Lord Jesus, work true repentance and humility in me, that I may be exalted and honored by your favor. Amen.

The Third Tuesday in Advent

“Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, ‘No; he shall be called John.’ And they said to her, ‘None of your relatives is called by this name.’ And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, ‘His name is John.’ And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, ‘What then will this child be?’ For the hand of the Lord was with him”

Luke 1:57–66

This is how it is. God gives us His promise to believe. Through His Spirit and the Word (including the Word of Holy Baptism) He gives us the faith to believe that promise. He gives us His Holy Spirit who works in us to do good — whether it is the good of following His Word or confessing His goodness for the world.

Abraham and Sarah’s faith in Christ bore fruit in works. By grace your faith in Christ will as well. This fruit is not your righteousness. Faith in Christ means you are reckoned by God as righteous, just like Abraham and Sarah are. The fruit from God serves your neighbor — it is important to keep this distinction in place, especially at this time of year. Faith alone saves, but faith in Christ will never be alone.

Dear Jesus, we give You thanks for the salvation You have achieved for us and give to us by faith. By Your Spirit nurture our faith in You through Your holy Word and Sacraments. Help us to grow in love for others. Grant us steadfast faith that bears fruit of works to help others. Amen.

First Friday in Advent

“After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.’ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.’”

Genesis 22:1–5

But Gabriel does not give Zechariah a sign to prove God’s intentions here. True, he is rendered mute, but that serves as discipline for his doubt, not as a sign to prove what Gabriel said. The Word of God is sufficient on its own. His promises would be fulfilled in their time and prove true.

From the Garden of Eden man has been prone to fall for the same temptation: to doubt God when the devil says, “Did God actually say?” But every Word of God proves true. Man would return to the dust because of his disobedience, but the woman’s Offspring came to bruise the serpent’s head. And His way was prepared by the boy named John, born to aged Zechariah and Elizabeth, just as the Lord had foretold it.

When God speaks His Word to you, do not doubt; only believe. He keeps every one of His promises. When He declares you forgiven for the sake of Jesus’ death, you are. When He promises you eternal life, it is yours.

O God, may I never doubt Your Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it. Amen.

The Third Monday in Advent

“But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.’”

Luke 1:13–17

“How shall I know this?” responded Zechariah to the promise spoken by the angel Gabriel. What a strange question! If the presence of the Lord’s angel in the Holy Place of the temple was not enough to convince Zechariah of the Lord’s willingness and ability to grant him and his wife a son, surely he could have remembered how the Lord had granted to Abraham and Sarah a son in their old age or to Hannah a son in her barrenness.

Abraham waited a long time to receive Isaac from God. God asked him to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham is a man of faith in God’s Word. God had promised that Isaac would be the son of the promise, that is, Isaac would be the son through whom the Christ would come and be a blessing to all nations.

So, Abraham saw Christ’s day and was glad. He believed in the resurrection, for God was the God of the living; He was the God of Abraham and of Isaac. Isaac would live because Christ would live. No matter what happened, the God for whom nothing was too hard would make sure that both Abraham and the boy would come back from their worship.

A father goes to sacrifice his only son on a mountain. This foreshadows the Father offering up His only-begotten Son at Calvary. Where the example of Abraham and Isaac is one of faith in the promise, the example of Christ Jesus is that of fulfillment of the promise. There is no greater blessing than the forgiveness of sins, and Christ Jesus in His sacrifice earns that blessing for all nations to be brought to them through the preached Word.

Dear Jesus, we give You thanks that You forgive our sins. Help us to cherish the preaching of your Word, Holy Baptism, absolution, and the Sacrament of the Altar. Forgive us for our many sins and grant us to trust your Word in all things. Amen.

First Saturday in Advent

And in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

Acts 3:25

“You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.’”

Genesis 22:18

The story of Isaac is really about the coming of Christ. His parents trusted in it and looked forward to it. They rejoiced in God’s faithfulness in giving Isaac, but found even greater joy in what God would eventually do through the singular Offspring who would come from Isaac’s lineage.

You see this is speaking of Christ Jesus. He is the fulfillment of the promises of God. All the Old Testament is geared to laying out these promises, especially in the accounts like that of Isaac. The New Testament then shows the fulfillment of those promises, one by one, in Christ Jesus.

Isaac was promised to his father Abram 25 years before he was born. Samuel was promised to his mother Hannah 9 months before he was born. John the Baptist, however, was promised around 700 years before he was born, and the promise was not only given to his father and mother, but to all God’s people.

Just as the Lord kept his promise to Abram and to Hannah, so He kept His promise to His people when John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and preaching not himself but Him who would come after John, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit: Jesus Christ.

In Jesus the promise made through the prophet Isaiah regarding John is fulfilled for you today. We are God’s people, the new Jerusalem, through faith in Christ. By His death and resurrection, your warfare is ended, your iniquity is pardoned, and you have received from the Lord’s hand double comfort for all your sins.

Likewise, the promise preached by John remains true for you today. The Lord God continues to come to his people in His Word and Sacrament. Through these means, His glory is revealed in the free and full forgiveness of sins by grace alone.

O Lord, grant that the Good News of Jesus Christ and the pardoning of my iniquities for His sake be my only comfort and assurance. Amen.

The Third Sunday in Advent

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’”

Isaiah 40:1–5

These passages speak of the nations of the earth being blessed. The greatest blessing happens when people of any nation hear the Word of God and believe it. Abraham and Isaac were promised that someday a singular offspring we be a blessing to all the earth. This is fulfilled in Jesus. Galatians 3 is very clear in declaring this to be the truth. In Christ, all the nations are blessed. This is because the work of Christ is a blessing to all nations.

His life, death, and resurrection is good news for all people. He commands baptism and preaching to be done among all nations, and the reception of the Sacrament of the Altar, for the forgiveness of sins. There is no greater blessing than to be forgiven – for in being forgiven you also have life and salvation.

Dear Jesus, we give You thanks for fulfilling Your Word and being a blessing to all nations. Thank You for sending men of God to preach Your Word to the nations. Help us to cherish our preachers as men sent by You. OGrant that we may hold onto Your Word in all things. Help us to go to church tomorrow and receive your gifts for our blessing. Amen.

The Second Sunday in Advent

“There was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph, an Ephrathite. He had two wives. The name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other, Peninnah. And Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. Now this man used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the LORD. On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. And her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. So it went on year by year. As often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?”

1 Samuel 1:1–8

It is unfortunate that the name Ebenezer survives only in an abstract sense in the hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”: “Here I raise my Ebenezer.” This is unfortunate because Israel’s memorials are always physical, tangible things that we can grasp with the senses. An Ebenezer is never an inward, individual, spiritual thing, but an external, corporate, visible thing.

On the first day of the week, the stone that had covered the mouth of the tomb was a physical testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. Yet like all the other stones of Israel, where is it today? These memorials no longer serve as memorials, yet the people of God need a memorial of the Lord’s victory over the enemy.

And Jesus has given us such a memorial that endures to eternity. He has made himself the memorial. The rock is Christ, who has set himself up in our midst forever, who gives himself to us tangibly in his Holy Supper, who says “this do in remembrance of me,” and who makes his victory over the enemy a present reality in the Sacrament of his body and blood.

The days of Samuel came to an end, and the Philistines once more reared their head. But the days of Jesus shall never end, and He will come at the last, and the subdued enemy will be no more, and we will dwell securely in the territory of Israel.

“I remember the days of old; I meditate on all that you have done; I ponder the work of your hands. Deliver me from my enemies, O LORD!” (Psalm 143: 5, 9).

The Second Saturday in Advent

“Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, ‘Till now the LORD has helped us.’ So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel. And the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. The cities that the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath, and Israel delivered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. There was peace also between Israel and the Amorites.”

1 Samuel 7:12-14

After the Lord’s complete victory over the Philistines, Samuel took a stone and set it up. It was not unusual to make such monuments in remembrance of the Lord’s great acts. When Jacob received a vision and promise of God in a dream, he set up the rock on which he had slept (Genesis 28:18–19). When Israel crossed through the Jordan, each tribe took a stone from the riverbed and set them up at Gilgal. Joshua said, “So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever” (Joshua 4:7).

The devil loved barrenness in the Old Testament. No seed of the woman meant no one to bruise his head (Genesis 3:15). As Peninnah provokes Hannah, we can hear the devil mocking all those who anticipated the seed of the woman, “Where is your offspring? Have you none? For whom do you wait? The offspring isn’t coming. Abandon hope.” Hannah hears the devil’s taunt, and we cry out, “How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? If the enemy to revile your name forever? Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the fold of your garment and destroy them!” (Psalm 74:10–11). The Church prays, and awaits the coming of the Lord.

We hear twice that “the Lord had closed her womb,” and this gives us hope as we wait. We aren’t waiting for the devil to let up, as if the coming of the Christ depends on him. We’re waiting for the Lord to act. The saints of old waited and clung to the promise, and when the fullness of time had come, the Lord opened Mary’s womb. The Lord proved true to his Word, as he always does. So let Peninnah mock. Let the devil thunder. The Church has her repose in the sure and certain Word of God. We may weep and fast, and our heart may grieve, but as certainly as the woman’s seed came once, so he will come again.

Arise, O God, defend your cause; remember how the foolish scoff at you all the day! Do not forget the clamor of your foes, the uproar of those who rise against you, which goes up continually” (Psalm 74:22–23). “Stir up your might and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!” (Psalm 80:2–3).

The Second Monday in Advent

“After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. And she vowed a vow and said, ‘O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.’ As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was speaking in her heart; only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli took her to be a drunken woman. And Eli said to her, ‘How long will you go on being drunk? Put your wine away from you.’ But Hannah answered, ‘No, my lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation.’ Then Eli answered, ‘Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him.’ And she said, ‘Let your servant find favor in your eyes.’ Then the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad.”

1 Samuel 1:9–18

The Israelites are gathered at Mizpah, fasting, and Samuel is praying for the people. And then the Philistines arrive. The Israelites are afraid, because they know that they’re no match for the Philistines. The sons of Israel look to the Lord’s prophet. They look to Samuel. They ask him to keep crying out on their behalf so that the Lord will save them. Samuel offers the whole burnt offering, and we see that it is because of the sacrifice that the Lord hears prayer and saves. Jesus hangs on the cross, offering himself up for the people and praying for them. As the pleasing aroma went up, the Lord thundered against the Philistines, and there was a great earthquake. The rocks split, the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. The devil and his host are confused and in a panic, and they are routed before the Son of God. Israel is no more afraid, and their pursuers have become the pursued. Defeated demons litter Golgotha. The ancient serpent has received his death blow. And our crucified Samuel has lived up to his name: He cried out for our salvation, and God heard.

“The LORD is the strength of his people; he is the saving refuge of his Messiah. Oh, save your people and bless your heritage! Be their shepherd and carry them forever” (Psalm 28:8-9).

The Second Friday in Advent

“Now when the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines. And the people of Israel said to Samuel, ‘Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines.’ So Samuel took a nursing lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. And Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him. As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel. But the LORD thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and they were defeated before Israel. And the men of Israel went out from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them, as far as below Beth-car.”

1 Samuel 7:7-11

Eli and Peninnah, and Peninnah’s sons and daughters, feasted in Shiloh, likely eating of their peace offerings in the tabernacle (cf. Leviticus 7:11–36). It was during these trips to Shiloh that Peninnah most sharply attacked Hannah: making her weep and stripping her of her appetite, and robbing her of the joy of the sacred meal. While at the tabernacle, Hannah rose, and in the bitterness of her soul she prayed to the Lord. She wept grievously, longing for a son, or as she says in Hebrew, “a seed of men.” Eli reckoned her a drunk. But she hadn’t been carousing in the temple. She had been pouring out her soul as the priest pours out the drink offering before the Lord.

The Church pours out the same drink offering that Hannah did, with all the bitter dregs of anxiety, complaint, vexation, and provocation. We ask for the Seed, the Offspring. Eli understood, and said, “Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have asked of him.” With this assurance that the Lord would hear her, Hannah went and ate. And we likewise have assurance that the Lord hears our cries of “Come, Lord Jesus!” He is the one who has promised, “Yes, I am coming quickly” (Rev. 22:20). We go in peace, and eat of him who has made himself our peace offering, and we hope for his coming with a hope that cannot be shaken.

“Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry come to you! Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress! Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call!” (Psalm 102:1–2). “Arise, O LORD; O God, lift up your hand; forget not the afflicted” (Psalm 10:12).

The Second Tuesday in Advent

“They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, ‘I have asked for him from the LORD.’ And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine, and she brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh. And the child was young. Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. And she said, ‘Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD. As long as he lives, he is lent to the LORD.’”

1 Samuel 1:19–20, 24–28

It is a common theme throughout the Scriptures that the people yearn for the Lord while simultaneously worshiping false gods, often not realizing the contradiction. And therefore it is also a common theme in the Scriptures that when the Lord’s prophet comes, he denounces the false gods and confronts the people with the contradiction and calls them to repentance. For this reason the Lord’s prophets are quite unpopular among certain people who say they want the true God but don’t want to give up their idols.

When Jesus comes on the Last Day, the time of repentance will be over. And therefore in love He comes to you now, and confronts you with your false gods, and grants you repentance and the forgiveness of sins. He speaks his Word and makes his voice heard through his pastors, who come in his stead. And as the word of Samuel brought death for the Baals and Ashtaroath, but deliverance for the people, so also Jesus comes with judgment for idols and salvation for you.

“Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us and atone for our sins, for your name’s sake! Let the groans of the prisoners come before you; according to the greatness of your arm, spare the sons of death” (Psalm 79:9, 11).

The Second Thursday in Advent

“And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, ‘If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.’ So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and they served the LORD only. Then Samuel said, ‘Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you.’ So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the LORD and fasted on that day and said there, ‘We have sinned against the LORD.’ And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah”

1 Samuel 7:3–6

Samuel is now grown, and the Lord has established him as a prophet (1 Samuel 3:19–4:1). The Israelites have been at war with the Philistines, and at one particularly unfortunate battle the ark of God had been captured by the enemy (1 Samuel 4). The Lord plagued the Philistines for taking it (1 Samuel 5), and they ended up sending it back to Israel (1 Samuel 6). The ark was at Kiriath-jearim for 20 years, “and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD” (1 Samuel 7:2). At this point Samuel addresses the house of Israel with the words of today’s reading.

The Lord remembered. This does not mean that He had forgotten Hannah’s prayer. It means that He called her petition to mind for the purpose of granting it. She conceived and bore a son, and called his name Samuel, which means “God heard,” for, “I have asked him from the Lord.” Samuel was an answer to prayer, just as John the Baptist was an answer to Zechariah’s prayer for the salvation of the people, because he would be the forerunner of the Christ (Luke 1:8–23). As Samuel would anoint David, so John would baptize Jesus.

Yet anytime there’s a unique offspring born of woman, we think of the promised Savior himself. Like Hannah, Mary knew that her Son was not her own. Like Hannah, Mary presented Jesus in the temple. And as Hannah said of Samuel, so the Church says of Jesus, “For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition that I asked of him.” The Lord remembered. He remembered His holy covenant and the groaning of His people. And in His Advent He has answered our prayers.

“I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me! O LORD, make haste to help me! You are my help and my deliverer; O my God, do not delay!” (Psalm 40:1, 13, 17).

The Second Wednesday in Advent

“And Hannah prayed and said, ‘My heart exults in the LORD; my horn is exalted in the LORD. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation. There is none holy like the LORD: for there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by his actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the LORD’s, and on them he has set the world. He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness, for not by might shall a man prevail. The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed.’”

1 Samuel 2:1–10

Hannah’s song is the Magnificat of the Old Testament, in many ways similar to Mary’s song in Luke 1:46–55. Both songs have as their theme the great reversals that the Lord brings about: He weakens the mighty and strengthens the feeble, He empties the sated and satisfies the hungry. When the Lord acts for our salvation, the appearance of things doesn’t matter. The strength of the strong is no asset, and dying on a cross is no hindrance. The Lord does as He pleases, working in ways completely contrary to what we would choose, and thus He shames arrogant men and the proud devil.

Hannah’s song is different from Mary’s song in this: Hannah had an adversary provoking her. So while Mary uses the third person singular (he has) throughout her song, Hannah slips in this line, which directly addresses her enemy: “Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth.”

Peninnah had mocked and scorned Hannah, just as the devil long provoked the saints. But when the Lord answers the prayers of his Church and comes, the Church gets to tell Peninnah to shut up. And Peninnah must be silent. Even now the devil’s mouth is full of Christ’s heel, and his ravings are nothing. This world’s prince can scowl, but he cannot harm us. And at the last the wicked one shall be silenced in darkness, as the Church sings her Magnificat to Christ.

“O LORD, let me not be put to shame, for I call upon you; let the wicked be put to shame; let them go silently to Sheol” (Psalm 31:17).