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(ADVENT 1—CHRISTMAS 1)

The Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America

SELECTIONS FROM THE PROPERs FOR ADVENT 1

THE GOSPEL

St. Matthew 21:1-8 (NKJV)

Now when they drew near Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them." All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying:

"Tell the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your King is coming to you, Lowly, and sitting on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

So the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded them. They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their clothes on them, and set Him on them. And a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road; others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

The Collect

Stir up, we beseech You, Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God.

We confess in the first part of the Nicene Creed, “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible.” We also confess, “...by whom [our Lord Jesus Christ] all things were made...”. When the Church confesses these things in the creed we are simply reiterating what we’ve been taught by the Holy Spirit and St. Paul in Colossians.

However, when it comes to thinking and speaking about God, sometimes Christ’s people forget the other truths that these Scripture verses teach us. People often think of God as *only* invisible, or as *only* a spirit. We forget that He not only created all things visible and invisible, but He also *reveals Himself to us* in ways visible and invisible!

Jesus Christ is how we actually see God. If our children ask us what God looks like, the first thing we need to tell them is to look at Jesus. Likewise should we answer the adversaries of Christ’s Church who say, “Show us your god!” Our first response should be to show them Jesus Christ crucified. Jesus’ crucifixion is the fullest image by which our otherwise invisible God shows Himself to mankind, because the crucifixion is a matter of flesh and blood, it is a matter of history, it is a matter of social and political consequences, while at the same time being a matter of the utmost spiritual significance.

The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is a real and visible way that He shows us that we have a God who loves us, to the point of sacrificing Himself for us. He also shows us that there is hope, which grows out of the forgiveness of our sins by His sacrifice. We have hope that our bodies *and* our souls will be made glorious and perfect in the resurrection, which will not only be a visible reality, but it will be more beautiful than anything we’ve seen yet in His already wonderful creation!

The name of Jesus Christ is our great treasure.

God comes to us and speaks to us more than we realize. Popular misconception says that we need God to speak to us in a thunderous voice from the clouds, or in some mystical personal experience. While it's true that God has spoken to His people in these ways in the past, we are naïve to limit the God and Creator of all things visible and invisible to man's assumptions about divine dramatics. God the Father made all things through His Son, Jesus Christ, who is the very incarnation of His glorious Words, and He has seen fit to speak to us by the same incarnate Word now.

We don't have to climb mountains or depend on emotional states for God to speak to us. He has given us His Word, which stands ready and preserved in print and also lives and breathes as it is taught and preached. We need not go any farther than a faithful translation of the Scriptures or the voice of a faithful pastor to hear God speak His wisdom and mercy to us. Or, if that isn't simple enough, He has also given us the very name of Jesus Christ as a comfort to us!

When there is no supernatural voice from wondrous places, and even when our memory fails us in chapters and verses from the Holy Scriptures, we still have the profound glory, yet simplicity, of the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we are told that God will save His people from their sins (the meaning of "Jesus"), and this Jesus is the Holy One anointed to be both our King and our Savior (the meaning of "Christ"). Furthermore, the name of Jesus Christ should also bring to our minds His crucifixion, which is the culmination of all the Scriptures.

The Second Commandment teaches us that we shall not take the name of the Lord in vain. This is most certainly true for Jesus' name because His most excellent name is the summing up of how God speaks to us, and we are tremendously blessed by all that He is ready to speak to us according to His name!

Jesus Christ is our great salvation!

God comes to us in His Word to tell us that we are forgiven. From the beginning of the world He has been coming to us through the same Word by which He created us! Sometimes He spoke directly to His people, other times He sent His messengers, the angels, and still other times He sent prophets, apostles, and evangelists. But they all brought the same Word that would be flesh and blood in Jesus Christ our Savior.

Unfortunately so many people still neglect the great salvation that God has given through Christ, which is why His Word continues to be proclaimed through the various powers and gifts of His Holy Spirit in the life of the Church. The wisdom of His Law must continue to work toward repentance and pious acts among men, and the power of His Gospel certainly continues to show forth God's love and merciful kindness toward us. The faithless need to hear these things so they might believe, and the faithful need to heed these things so that we not drift away from the faith, but do the very works of Christ who lives in us!

It is no small thing that God indeed comes to us, even if it is through simple Words! It would be difficult for any of us to live a normal life without the blessings of common, everyday words, so how much more difficult would it be for us to live without the benefits of God's Word? Yet the sinfulness of our hearts and flesh compels us to try it every day. This makes the exhortation of the second chapter in Hebrews most certainly true and important. "Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away."

God has given us a profound gift of peace, life, and salvation in the Word of Jesus Christ. May He continue to strengthen us to heed that Word and bear witness to Christ in all we do, according to His own will!

God's people are united in Jesus Christ.

The revelation of God's grace to us in Jesus Christ ties His people together, making us the Church. He has come to different people at different times throughout history, but we all end up coming together into one holy body according to His truth and mercy. His people of Israel were given the promises and miracles that showed God's love and faithfulness to man, but when the fulfillment of His promises were revealed in Christ Jesus He shows us that people from all nations might be made fellow heirs of everlasting life through faith in Him.

God comes to the world through the Word of His Son, but He also makes that Word known through the life and work of His one true Church. Jesus had a body of flesh and blood that was nailed to the cross for the atonement of our sins, and that same body was glorified in His resurrection from death, and ascension into Heaven. However, we cannot forget the fact that Christ *still* has a body of flesh and blood that is made up of the members of His Church! We as members of the Body of Christ, who are fed from the body and blood of Jesus, are also made to manifest His wisdom and grace as He comes to the world through us.

For ages God has shown us that He fulfills His promises and accomplishes our forgiveness through Jesus. Whether it is by the tribulations and miracles for historic Israel, the persecutions and ministry of St. Paul, or the struggles and confession of His saints in His Church today, all these things point to the cross of Jesus Christ where our salvation is accomplished! So we are made part of that same body, which lives, breathes, and shows forth God's eternal purpose that comes to all mankind in His Word.

SELECTIONS FROM THE PROPERs FOR ADVENT 2

THE GOSPEL

St. Luke 21:25-36 (NKJV)

“And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men’s hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of heaven 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 happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near.”

Then He spoke to them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. When they are already budding, you see and know for yourselves that summer is now near. So you also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near.”

“Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.

“But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

The COLLECT

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Thine only-begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve Thee with pure minds; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth, and reigneth, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

“Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing,
Him I proclaim to you.” Acts 17:23b

God the Word, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the One whom we know as Jesus Christ . . . this Eternal Word of God assumed our body and blood. He was made perfect man so that He could live a holy life in our place, and offer Himself up as a sacrifice on the cross for our salvation. The first step of that, of course, was the “incarnation” . . . the “becoming flesh” of God the Son. And that’s what we look forward to celebrating at Christmas!

Now, that seems so obvious to us, that we forget how many people don’t know anything about that. They think about Santa Claus (based loosely on St. Nikolas of Myra, whom the church remembers on Dec. 6th!), and presents and trees and special meals and goodies. It’s easy to be contemptuous of all of that.

But do you see what St. Paul did? Instead of being contemptuous of the altar “to the unknown god,” he *used* that as an opportunity to explain the Gospel. We can do the same thing with our neighbors who celebrate Christmas in ignorance. Tell them what it’s really all about! Tell them that God became man so that He could save us and give us eternal life! In speaking such words, not only do you give your neighbor “the words of eternal life,” but you speak them into your own ears once again too. What joy, that as we prepare for Christmas, we do not do so in ignorance. Rather, we look forward to celebrating the birth of our God-man Savior, Jesus Christ! Amen.

Suggested Hymn: “Savior of the Nations, Come” (TLH 95, LSB 332)

“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” 1 John 4:10

What have we ever done, that God would want to save us? Were we so beautiful, or rich, or wise, that God just had to have us on His side? Was it because God saw in advance all the good works that He could get out of us? Was it because we made a decision for Jesus, because we “asked Jesus into our hearts”? Many believe these things. Nevertheless we know that none of them are true. Our salvation does not depend on us at all, as the Holy Scriptures clearly teach in Ephesians 2:8-9, “it is by grace you are saved through faith, and that *not* of ourselves . . .”

One clear illustration of that point comes in God’s sending of His Son in the first place. St. John says it unmistakably: “This is love, not that we loved God . . .” God wasn’t responding to anything we did! Rather, God was taking the initiative, choosing to love us by grace even though there was nothing lovely about us, and sending His Son to die for us, to forgive us, to make us what by nature we are not: “lovely” in His eyes, holy and righteous.

And if some of our Christian neighbors get their feelings hurt when we tell them that their good works or emotional decisions don’t actually save them, we can follow up by telling them what good news that really is. Nothing depends on us! It all depends on Christ. Because our salvation totally depends on our perfect Savior, we have nothing to worry about. If we had a part, we could mess up our part, and fear all our lives long that we weren’t really saved. But since it’s all God’s doing, we rejoice in confident peace. He loves us! We know, because He sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins! Amen.

Suggested Hymn: “Lord, ‘tis not that I did choose Thee” (TLH 37, LSB 573)

“. . . the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints.”

Colossians 1:26

God made many promises in the Old Testament. The curse spoken upon the serpent clear back in the Garden of Eden was a backhanded promise to us: The seed of the woman would crush the Serpents' head. Abraham did not have to sacrifice his own son Isaac, and prophesied that the Lord would provide. Moses spoke of a prophet to come, Isaiah spoke of a suffering servant, Daniel spoke of one “like the Son of Man.” The promise was given to David that one of his descendants would sit on his throne forever.

It was enough to know that God was planning our salvation; that He was “up to *something*.” And yet, it wasn't clear to the ancients exactly *what* God was going to do. There was, as our text says, “the mystery which has been hidden from ages and generations.” Some people even thought God would send a whole series of Messiahs! They just couldn't imagine how any one man could fulfill all of the Old Testament promises.

What they could not imagine, we now see. It has been revealed to us, His saints, and how glorious it is! While the world cooks up whatever gods it finds convenient to believe in, we see God assuming our flesh in the person of Christ, so to be our Savior! All we can do is marvel: Only God could have thought to save us *like that!* Thanks be to God, who has fulfilled His every promise to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Suggested Hymn: “Hail to the Lord's Anointed” (TLH 59, LSB 398)

Thursday, December 9: Hebrews 1:1-4

Advent 2

“God ... has in these last days spoken to us by His Son ...”

Hebrews 1:2

Have you ever seen one of those fights people have, where one of them stops talking to the other? The one on the receiving end of the silent treatment may say all kinds of things to the angry party, wishing to resume communication, but all they get is silence. The Lord even warns in the Old Testament about a “famine of hearing the Word of the Lord” (Amos 8:11)

Thanks be to God, we are in the midst of no such famine ourselves! “God’s Word is our great heritage, and shall be ours forever.” So we sing, so we rejoice, so we live. God has given us His Word . . . not just His written Word, but “the Word made flesh,” our Lord Jesus Christ. And that same Jesus has both spoken the words and done the deeds of our salvation . . . not only living a perfect life, and dying a sacrificial/atoning death, and gloriously rising to life again, but also giving us the words that tell us what these things have accomplished. With those same words, we are called to faith in Him.

Thanks be to God, He gives us no “silent treatment.” He speaks to us, and generously bestows upon us “the words of eternal life,” through His Son, Jesus Christ our Savior.

Suggested Hymn: “Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word” (TLH 261, LSB 655)

“How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation ... ?”

Hebrews 2:3a

God speaks to us through His Son. We saw that, yesterday. Can you think of anything more rude than just flat ignoring someone who is trying to speak to you? For the believing mind, it is beyond imagination that we would intentionally treat God that way. And yet, that’s what Hebrews warns us against! Why?

Well, of course a believer would never intentionally ignore God. But there is ever the danger of being “too busy” (can you imagine *that* happening as Christmas approaches?). And more to the point, it is possible to lose our salvation, by starving ourselves from hearing the Word of the Lord until faith finally dies! Dear ones in Christ, do not let this happen!

Rather, heed the warning. No excuse will be good enough on judgment day for having ignored the Lord. And when we contemplate the eternal pleasures at the right hand of God that await the redeemed, why would we let ourselves be distracted by the trivial things of this world anyway? We’ve got more important things to think about. We have the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation on account of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Suggested Hymn: “Salvation unto us has come,” (TLH 377, LSB 555)

“that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the Gospel.”

Ephesians 3:6

Have you ever seen siblings squabble over the division of an estate? It always seems odd to me, that these who should support each other in grieving the loss of their parents, instead turn into enemies. Even more odd, in my limited experience, it seems like those who are most likely to bicker like that are the ones who are fighting over relatively little money. Perhaps it is the luxury of those who inherit bigger estates to put aside the bickering because “there’s enough to go around.”

In our text today, St. Paul tells us that Gentiles will be “fellow heirs.” That is to say, they will share the heavenly inheritance with the children of Israel. Now, I remember early in my ministry, serving a congregation in a very racially divided southern town. Like so many Lutheran congregations, it was named “Grace Lutheran Church.” But one day, the letter “G” fell off the church sign! I used the opportunity to preach on the topic of racial division, with a sermon entitled “the day the G fell off of Grace.”

Thanks be to God, we are saved by grace, not by race. Thanks be to God, because most of us are the wrong race! From a Biblical perspective, there are really only two kinds of people ... Israelites and Gentiles. God gave His promises to the Israelites, but most of us are Gentiles! But we are saved by grace, not by race. In the shedding of His blood, Jesus became not only the Redeemer of Israel, but also the Savior of the Nations, the Gentiles. Your salvation doesn’t depend on your race, but on God’s grace ... His grace to you in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Suggested Hymn: “Come, Thou Precious Ransom, Come.” (TLH 55, LSB 350)

SELECTIONS FROM THE PROPERs FOR ADVENT 3

THE GOSPEL

St. Matthew 11:2-10 (NKJV)

And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"

Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."

As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.'"

The COLLECT

Lord, we beseech You, give ear to our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your visitation; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

“Therefore do not throw away your confidence”... “you have need of endurance”... “when you have done the will of God”... “preserve their souls”... all this sounds like God expects a great deal of us. Fact is, He does!

He expects you to hold fast to His promise rather than “shrink back.” God comes to you through His Word to tell you all that He has done for you. He took your sins and placed them on Jesus where they were crucified with Him. He baptized you and made you His own dear child. He blesses you each day you walk this earth.

Yet, sadly we throw it all away every time we sin. We throw God out so that we may indulge in the sin of the moment. Sin so infects us that it continually drives us away from God.

“Therefore do not throw away your confidence”... “you have need of endurance”... “when you have done the will of God”... “preserve their souls”... all this sounds like God expects a great deal of us. Fact is, He does and that is why Jesus came into this world.

He remained confident for us, “Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit.” He “endured the cross, scorning it shame.” He did the will of God. He did not shrink back but “gave His back to smiters.” He is God’s “Beloved Son.”

Our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews fits well with the theme for the Third Sunday in Advent, *Gaudete* Sunday. *Gaudete* is the first word in Latin of the Introit appointed for this Sunday, which is translated, “Rejoice.” As the Introit proclaims, “Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.” We rejoice in knowing that Jesus is our Confidence and that He will allow nothing to separate us from Him.

Joel Osteen is a popular preacher from Houston, Texas. In his book, *Your Best Life Now*, he wrote the following: “Don’t just accept whatever comes your way in life. You were born to win; you were born for greatness; you were created to be a champion in life.”

Hmm? Did Jesus miss something that Joel Osteen later discovered in Scripture? The future that Jesus describes for His disciples was anything but *Your Best Life Now* as defined by Joel Osteen. Jesus told His disciples that they would be manhandled, persecuted, imprisoned, brought before authorities, betrayed by family members and relatives, hated, and even put to death.

The call of Christ is, “Take up your cross and Me.” He calls you to give up everything in this life in order to have real life. Real life is found in Christ and the forgiveness of sins. In Christ, you do have *Your Best Life Now* though in your life, like that of the Apostles, you may find yourself manhandled, persecuted, imprisoned, brought before authorities, betrayed by family members and relatives, hated, and even put to death for the sake of Christ and the Gospel. Yet, in spite of all that it is still *Your Best Life Now* for you belong to Christ and you will not be “snatched from [His] hand.”

In fact, when you belong to Christ it’s not only a matter of *Your Best Life Now*, but a matter of *Your Best Life Now.... AND FOREVER!*

Peter said, “Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for all?” Our text tells us that Christ not only spoke to His disciples but that He also spoke to the crowd.

When Jesus speaks of the Master in these parables, He is speaking of Himself and His appearing to His people. At the end of this lesson we hear our Lord chastise the people for not recognizing that God, Jesus in the flesh, was among them. The prophets of old foretold the signs that would indicate the Messiah had come. Every miracle attested to Jesus being the Messiah. Yet the people did “not know how to interpret the present time.”

Why? Because it is clear from the preceding parable there were many “managers,”—the spiritual leaders whom God had “set over His household,”—who had failed to teach the people about the signs of the coming Messiah. But by God’s grace, some “managers” were faithful and fed God’s people on His pure Word in preparation for our Lord’s arrival. Most notable was John the Baptist.

What we need to understand is that by recording this event, Jesus is also speaking to us, today. We, too, need to be prepared for His coming and that is why He still has “managers,” spiritual leaders, in His Church today. We commonly refer to them as pastors. It is the pastor’s duty “to give them [the congregation] their portion of food at the proper time.” The pastor is required to give God’s people the “pure spiritual milk” of His Word, Law and Gospel, and to serve them the very Body and Blood of Christ for the forgiveness of their sins.

Who of us is really patient? Fast food restaurants are everywhere. Many of them have drive up window service so you don't even have to get out of your car to get your food. You just drive up, place your order, then go to the window and get your food.

But, then there is the waiting in line or even worse, you get to the window, pay for your food, only to be told to drive ahead and wait for them to bring it out to you. How terrible, huh? You maybe had to wait, what, uh, two extra minutes?

James knows the impatience that lies within each of us. He was with the disciples when Jesus told them about the coming destruction of Israel (our reading from Tuesday). And James was at our Lord's Ascension when the disciples impatiently asked, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Instead, he and the other Apostles were told to wait and they would "receive power" from the Holy Spirit and would become His "witnesses." The Apostles, like the prophets who came before them, would also be "examples of suffering and patience." Such is life under the Cross.

But the patience given us by God to endure the sufferings of this world is but a minute fraction of the patience He has toward us. "The Lord is not slow concerning his promise, as some men count slowness; but is patient toward you, not wanting that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). We can all thank God that He is far more patient with us than we deserve and grants us patience to endure to the end.

As Luke begins to record his account for Theophilus, Luke tells of Zachariah and Elizabeth. Luke was quite a literary craftsman in that he builds a bridge from the Old Testament to the New Testament with this account. This elderly couple would have a son. Much like Abraham and Sarah, though advanced in years and beyond the time when one would expect a couple to have a child, Zachariah and Elizabeth were to become the parents of the Prophet John the Baptist.

John would be the last prophet. He would be the bridge between the Promise, which was spoken of, and the Promise come in the flesh. With John's work done, Jesus would increase while John would decrease to the point where he would be imprisoned and ultimately die because he spoke the Truth. John boldly preached about Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Yet, as we heard in last Sunday's Gospel reading, after all his bold preaching John was beginning to have his doubts about Jesus, "Are you He who is to come, or should we look for another?"

In a way, John is, as they say, "A chip off the old block." When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zachariah while Zachariah was in the Temple, Zachariah had his own doubts about the Word of God delivered to him by the angel. As a result, Zachariah would be mute until the birth of his son.

Though both father and son had their doubts, God did not cease in showing His love toward them as well as to Elizabeth, John's mother. God kept His Word and delivered to them what all God's people need, forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake.

Luke continues telling the story of Savior of the World. Having set the stage by telling of the promise made to Zachariah and Elizabeth that they would have a son named John, Luke now links the miraculous conception of John to the even more miraculous conception: “incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary.”

Once again the angel Gabriel is given the task of delivering the message and once again the initial response to his appearance is one of fear. But Gabriel tells Mary, “Do not be afraid,” as he did with Zachariah, “for you have found favor with God.” There was nothing special about Mary. She did not make herself favorable to God. Instead, God looked upon her with mercy. God had chosen this young maiden to be the Mother of God.

Mary’s Son would be all that His Father in Heaven required of mankind. He is perfect... perfect in life and perfect in death. Mary’s Son would restore God’s kingdom to the perfection it had “In the beginning.” Mary’s Son would reign in His kingdom forever. And most important for Mary, her Son would be her Savior and Redeemer.

Mary had “found favor with God” and would bear His Son. Mary had every reason to rejoice for she would bear a Son whose name would be called Jesus. Mary was indeed blessed by God and so are we. We are God’s children through Holy Baptism and we, too, rejoice, for Mary’s Son and Savior is also our Savior.

SELECTIONS FROM THE PROPERs FOR ADVENT 4

GOSPEL

St. John 1:19-28 (NKJV)

Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

And he answered, "No."

Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?"

He said: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the LORD,' " as the prophet Isaiah said."

Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. And they asked him, saying, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. "It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose."

These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

The Collect

Stir up O Lord, we beseech Thee, Thy power, and come and help us with Thy great might, that by Thy grace whatsoever is hindered by our sins may be speedily accomplished through Thy mercy and satisfaction; who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us.” Matthew 1:22, 23

The essence of “incarnational theology,” is this: The Holy Spirit by the will of the Father makes Christ present for us. Therefore we know that the holy triune God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is of one mind with regard to salvation. And we see Jesus present “incarnationally” not just in His birth in Bethlehem, but also in Word and Sacrament.

Jesus said the wealth of the whole world is not enough to buy a single soul out of God’s prison. He quipped, “What will a man give in exchange for his soul?” The price of salvation is infinite; therefore only infinite God could pay the price.

God with us means that our Savior-God gave His infinitely valuable blood in exchange for our souls. Because His blood has infinite value, it is valuable enough to pay for all souls. What will a man give for his soul? The precious blood of Christ, “...given and shed for you, for the remission of sins.”

Suggested Hymn: Of the Father’s Love Begotten (TLH 98, LSB 384)

Prayer: Lord God, Heavenly Father; You made yourself known to us in these last days by Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Grant that by the Holy Spirit He remains with us and we live eternally through Him; Who lived, died, and rose for us. Amen.

And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Luke 1:41

It is fun to ask, “When did Christ become man?” The normal quick response is, “When he was born.” But Christ Jesus was among us a full nine months before that, hidden from sight. Christ became man when He was conceived in the womb of the blessed virgin.

Every human being except Jesus is a damned sinner while still inside its mother. Each one of us began as an enemy of God. When Mary greeted Elizabeth, Christ was with her—with her words. The effect of Christ’s presence with Mary was that the Baby inside of Elizabeth was stirred by those words. Since Christ Jesus is still present with His Word today, that word has creative power, and the faithful Christian mother does well to take her baby to church while still in the womb.

Adults are also affected by Christ’s presence in the Word. Elizabeth, whom we are told was among the faithful, was filled with the Holy Spirit at Mary’s words. She in turn spoke a blessing to Mary and told her of the things of God. Because Jesus is present with the Word, it has the power to create and increase faith. Thanks be to God!

Suggested Hymn: Once He Came in Blessing (TLH 74, LSB 333)

Prayer: Holy Incarnate God, we are lost without You. Be present with Your Word to give it faith-creating power; Who lives and reigns with the Father and the Spirit. Amen.

And Mary said: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.” Luke 1:46, 47

Mary in being the mother of our brother Jesus is in a sense the mother of us all. We do well, then to follow her example. Mary was not proud and puffed as she carried Christ-God in her womb. Instead she was awed by the grace of God shown to her. She made no claim to holiness, but rejoiced in God her Savior. Her joy was not that she had done great things, but that God has done great things for her.

Like Mary, we too need a Savior. We brothers and sisters of the One born of the Virgin have nothing of which to boast in ourselves. We have not kept God’s Law; on the contrary, we break it daily. But God, according to His eternal promise made so long ago, is merciful and sent our brother Jesus to live, die, and rise again for us. God could not die for us, nor could he live for us. But taking the human nature into Himself in Christ, He could live under God’s Law and die under God’s Law. Therefore Jesus is God our savior, having fulfilled God’s Law and having died to pay for our sin.

Suggested Hymn: A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth (TLH 142, LSB 438)

Prayer: Lamb of God, sacrificed for our sins, keep us in true faith unto eternal life that our Father in Heaven may be glorified in You. Amen.

But they said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name.” Luke 1:61

The world would call us its own. The world would name us and have us conform to itself. Truly, each of us comes into this world of the world. By virtue of being conceived by sinful man, we are not holy, not welcome into the presence of holy God, enemies of God. We enter this life as worshippers of ourselves like the world around us. Even into adulthood we fight the tendency to lash out if our needs and wants are not immediately met. If you doubt this, go for a drive in rush hour traffic. We are idolaters who believe that our needs and wants are to be fulfilled without regard to how it affects others.

But the Holy Ghost calls us and separates us from the world. Adopted as God’s children through the waters of holy Baptism, we are born again as holy children of God. We are given a new name. And, though we remain in the world, we are no longer of the world. The world now does not understand us any more than it understands Christ our Savior or John His forerunner. The important thing then, is that God our Father claims us as His children.

Suggested Hymn: When Sinners See Their Lost Condition (TLH 65)

Prayer: Come, Lord Jesus, and rescue us from this dying world. You made us Your brothers and sisters. Give us the Holy Spirit in rich measure so that we remain in faith unto eternal life. Amen.

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 the days of our life. Luke 1:74, 75

We confess that Jesus has “purchased and won us from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil.” So often we think of our enemies being people. But our true enemies are sin, death, and the devil. If we do not understand this, we will fail to love those for whom Jesus died.

All who believe in Jesus should expect persecution. We fear persecution. This is normal. Courage is to stand firm even as our knees knock and teeth chatter. We can face persecution confident that we are already victors over it. As the hymn says, “He can harm us none,” and “They yet have noting won; The kingdom ours remaineth.”

We are delivered from sin, death, and the devil. We sin, but sin has no power over us—it is cancelled. We may die, but death is now the door to life. The devil rages and seeks to devour, but as the hymn states, “He’s judged; the deed is done.” Christ accomplished this for us by becoming man, tramping down death by death. We do not need to fear those who can destroy the body, but the one who has power over body and soul; the One who in love sent His Son to redeem us.

Suggested Hymn: A Mighty Fortress is Our God (TLH 262, LSB 656-657)

Prayer: Lord Christ, help us to love others as You love us. Amen.

“The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham.” Matthew 1:1

It hardly seems possible that God could have human ancestry. The Church sees truth as so profound that it is customary to bow or genuflect when reciting the words of the Nicene Creed, “And became man.” But it goes beyond the fact that our Lord was born of a virgin. Being born of an inviolate womb is humble enough, but looking over Christ’s ancestry we see clearly that Christ came to earth for sinners. Among those Jesus claimed as His ancestors are people guilty of lying, incest, murder, theft, adultery, and fornication along with Gentiles.

Truly in Christ, God has drawn near to sinful man to redeem sinful man. In Christ God became what God was not—a human being to save human beings. No matter how disgusting our sins are—to ourselves or others—our Savior was born to die for those very sins. It is God who moved toward us. It is He who gave gifts to us. Among those gifts are His human body and blood which we take into ourselves so that we might receive strength from them. Since Christ’s holy, innocent Body and Blood have touched our lips, our sins are atoned for and our guilt taken away.

Suggested Hymn: All Praise to Thee Eternal God (TLH 80, LSB 382)

Prayer: Son of Man, begotten of the Father in eternity, You were not ashamed to call mortal sinners Your family. Unite us with Yourself in Your Body and Blood that we may live eternally. Amen.

SELECTIONS FROM THE PROPERs FOR CHRISTMAS 1

GOSPEL

St. Luke 2:33-40 (NKJV)

And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

So when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.

The COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, direct our actions according to Your good pleasure, that in the name of Your beloved Son we may be made to abound in good works; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

St. Paul calls the incarnation of Jesus, “the mystery of godliness” (1 Tim 3:16). John the Baptist presents this same mystery of “the Word made flesh” with a riddle of sorts. Translated into a very literal rendering, John 1:15 reads, “He who comes after me is become before me, because the first of me He was.” The first part of the sentence presents two disparate things. Jesus (1) who is before John, (2) has come after John. How can this be? How can Jesus be both before and after John?

The answer is not that the younger Jesus, who is born second, is first in importance—though that is true. The answer is not that John, who came first in time, is second in that we prefer Jesus more—though that, also, should be true. The riddle is not the result of John using a different referent for “after” and “before.” Both “after” and “before” is a reference to time.

The answer is given in the second part of the sentence, “... because the first of me He was.” In comparison with John (“me”), Jesus truly was “first.” Jesus has always been true God from eternity. John is truly after Jesus in time with reference to His divine nature. However, John is before Jesus with reference to the birth of His human nature. John’s riddle does not solve the mystery, it only reveals it! Jesus is both true God and true man. As a result of Christ’s two natures in one Person, we receive an infinite fountain of grace and truth—the forgiveness of our sins.

As a young boy I asked my mother if I had to go to church today. She responded, “No, we don’t have to go to church. We get to go to church. We’re Christians.” This advice accurately describes a Christian’s motivation to do good works. With salvation completed in Christ, our good works are simply thankfulness to the God who has saved us.

This angelic announcement that a Savior has been born in Bethlehem takes this teaching to a new level. After the angels’ departure, the shepherds didn’t say, “We don’t have to go tonight do we?” The lackadaisical response wasn’t, “You know, someday we ought to make a visit to that place.” They emphatically said, “Let us NOW go to Bethlehem....” There is not only the desire to go, but “they came with haste.” The shepherds left immediately.

Hebrews 3:13-15, “...exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said: ‘Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.’ (Psalm 95:7-8)”

Faith is not weak or worse yet dead (James 2). Faith is not an optional thing. The Word creates faith, which by definition holds on to Christ. When the pastor preaches the Gospel message of forgiveness in Jesus Christ, faith doesn’t ask do I have to believe or would this be a good time to trust in that message? Faith says, “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2).

Joseph brings Mary to the Temple for the purification sacrifice (Lev 12:2-8). Of necessity, the nursing child Jesus would go wherever Mary went. The holy family could not afford to bring a lamb for a burnt offering and had to bring either a pigeon or dove for a sin offering. In accordance with the poor exemption (v. 8), they bring two doves for Mary's purification.

Although it is Mary's purification that is the occasion for their coming to Jerusalem, St. Luke rightly keeps the emphasis on Jesus' coming to the Temple. The prophet Malachi had created this expectation of the Messiah. "The Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming" (Malachi 3:1).

Since the Passover killing of the first-born in Egypt, all the firstborn belong to the Lord (Ex 13:12-15). As the first-born Son of Mary, Jesus belongs to the Lord. In keeping with the law, He must be bought back (redeemed) for 5 shekels of silver (Num 18:16). It seems unusual that the sacrifice for Mary's purification is explicitly mentioned by St. Luke, but nothing is said about the redemption price for Jesus, unless, of course, the Son of God was not redeemed that day, since He was already, "the Son of the Most High" (Lk 1:32), and already "the Holy One" (Lk 1:35). Hebrews 7:26-27, "For such a High Priest was fitting for us...who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself."

The Holy Spirit moves Simeon to go to the temple and causes him to receive Jesus in his arms and bless God. The Holy Spirit stirs up Simeon to sing the *Nunc Dimittis*. You have been given that same Holy Spirit, which Simeon received. Like Simeon going to the Jerusalem temple, you are led by the Holy Spirit to find Jesus in His Word and Sacraments. Listening to the various Christmas accounts, you have celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ in the Christmas services. Through the hearing of God's Word, you have taken up the Christ in your hearts and like Mary you have marveled at what was said about him. Through the receiving of Christ's Body and Blood in Lord's Supper, you have taken up Jesus Christ in your arms. The pastor dismisses you with the words, "Depart in peace." Your hearty "Amen" shows that you believe that Jesus is the Christ and that you are forgiven and prepared for death.

According to the plan of God the news must first go to those who are waiting for the redemption of Israel, but it won't be long before this message will go out to the Gentiles. Upon hearing the song of Simeon, the Prophetess Anna gives thanks and spreads the news of Jesus Christ. With God's favor upon us, we depart in peace to lead holy lives. Through the Spirit of Jesus working in our lives we receive a life of sanctification. We live out what has already been prepared for us.

St. John Chrysostom, who was preaching on this text in 386-388 A.D., addressed the injustice that was done to these infants. He says, “That although there be many that injure, yet there is not so much as one that is injured.... I mean, that what we may suffer unjustly from any one, it tells either to the doing away of our sins, God so putting that wrong to our account; or unto the recompense of rewards” (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, V.10, p.56). He teaches us that although there may be those who harm us, God will use it to makes us better Christians while we are here or reward us in the life to come, and thus we are never truly injured.

Though things do not turn out as you had planned, do not pay it any mind. God is answering your prayer so that “His will is done.” Nothing escapes the knowledge of the Most High. God knew in advance that Jesus would need to flee Bethlehem. God knew in advance that Herod would have these children killed. Things did not happen in this way because He could not stop it. It is not that God did not know what would happen. God did it this way for a purpose. It must have been for the good (Rom 8:28). As we rejoice in the victory of these redeemed infants of the Lord, we learn to kill off our own understanding and trust in our God, who provided His Son Jesus Christ to suffer and die at the appointed time. We trust that God has defeated all evil in the person of His Son (Rom. 5:3-5).

God instituted circumcision in which the foreskin was cut off and thrown away. The flesh is always a reminder of sin. In circumcision, through the shedding of blood, sin was cut off, so that the one circumcised would become a child of God. It is in the first shedding of Jesus' blood that the Only-Begotten Son receives His most glorious Name. The name Jesus means, "One who saves." Jesus saves through the shedding of blood. Though Jesus was without sin, He placed Himself under the law for our sake. Jesus endured all that sinners should receive, so that we would escape death.

In the Early Church the debate about whether to circumcise the Gentiles was answered with a resounding, "No." The reason is found in Colossians 2:9-12, "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power. In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."

In the circumcision of Christ, the Father put off the body of your sinful flesh by the shedding of His Son's blood. You received the benefits of Jesus' Circumcision through your baptism into Christ. The Early Church is right. The Gentiles do not need to be circumcised, because Jesus completely fulfilled the Old Testament law and promises. Our only need to receive those benefits is faith in Jesus Christ.

REFORMATION DAY AT ST. BONIFACE (NILES, MI)



St. Boniface congregation at their new location...



Newest members of St. Boniface (Joe & Sharron Mayberry)