

EQUIPPING...

for the Work of Ministry

ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS DEVOTIONS

Devotions for the Advent and Christmas Seasons
written by rostered leaders in the Montana Synod

2020





Introduction:

We are in the midst of a pandemic. It is Advent and Christmas is coming soon. Many of us are feeling a multitude of difficult emotions and dealing with situations for which we have no roadmap. This may well not feel like a season of abundance and generosity. But in these devotions, may you catch a glimpse of light and hope, and be reminded of God's generosity and grace, even in these days. As the Montana Synod is working toward a theme of "Equipping for the work of ministry" based on Ephesians 4, tending to our relationship with God revealed in Jesus and being mindful of how God has blessed and sustains us even in these months, is to be equipped for ministry!

These devotions have been written by leaders of congregations here in the Montana Synod to be a gift to all of us in the territory of northern Wyoming and Montana to help us reflect on God's love and presence and light that come to us even in dark times. Please look for the themes of comfort, abundance and grace that are ours through Christ Jesus.

A word of thanks to the Montana Synod Stewardship Task Force, and Synod staff for their leadership in this endeavor. And a sincere word of thanks to the rostered leaders who have written these devotions for us.

A blessed Advent to you and a Merry Christmas. May you be equipped to experience God's hope and grace in these coming weeks.

Pastor Peggy Paugh Leuzinger

Director for Evangelical Mission,
Montana Synod, ELCA





Stewardship In This Advent and Christmas Season

During these seasons of Advent and Christmas in these devotions, we are invited to consider what is Holy in this time. Wondering, uncertainty, longing and doubt have all been visited upon us during these days and we do not need to look far to see our own need and the needs of the world. Advent is associated with being in a place of uncertainty and waiting and this year we do not need to use our imaginations to bring us to the full realization of that place. And yet, we are reminded that in this particular circumstance can come hopeful wonderment – even desperate and joyous anticipation – waiting for God to appear and for light to shine forth.

It seems appropriate that these devotions ended with the visit of the Wise Men. These messengers – drawn by whatever forces motivated them – recognized the royalty and kingship of Jesus and brought gifts fit for a king, or a divine being. Traditionally, these gifts have been interpreted to possess specific symbolism. Gold, representing Christ’s kingship; frankincense, a resin used in worship, his priesthood; and myrrh, an ointment used in burial, foreshadowing his death. Myrrh also signifies the passion of Jesus, who was offered wine mingled with myrrh as he hung upon the cross.

The Wise Men could not have known that their gifts signified something that was completely true and necessary but also completely misunderstood and beyond the confines of this world and its kingdoms. They came compelled by hope and joy and mystery following a sign in the heavens to welcome a king by giving gifts fit for a king and departed in wonderment and awe that the very heavens themselves had been altered. We do not know what became of their gifts. We know that they were not used for their intended purpose as Jesus did not become the type of king they expected. However, these gifts, used by God in other ways, provided protection and freedom and sustenance in helping provide for and protect the God-Child.

As we consider the gloom of these times in which we live – we can also, like the Wise Men, rejoice in the light that signifies the arrival of our King and Lord, and bring our gifts – with whatever motivation may be in our hearts – to be used in whatever manner God may choose to use them, whether we fully understand that purpose or not. What is important, is that we bring them... Amen.





First Sunday in Advent, November 29, 2020

Mark 13:24-37

Jesus reminds us that abundance is found not in what we have, but in what we will be given – a leaf on a tree that has not yet unfolded, a master of the house yet to arrive. Salvation lies not in basking in the riches one possesses, but in the promise for which one hopes.

The COVID pandemic has laid bare the false security of our worldly riches – systems of finances, government, family, and even religion. For as good as these and other things can be, they can and will break down, they will be perverted and misused for evil, and they certainly cannot give life.

But in the darkest hour, when the tree is bare and cold, when the sun is dark and the moon refuses to shine, then comes the word that will not pass away. Like a flash from heaven and a knock of the door in the dead of night – not apart from the pain and suffering of this world, but in the middle of it – Advent announces God’s hope of promise.

Keep awake not to guard your treasure, but to receive the generous gift that God is about to share.

Pastor Scott R. Thompson

Bethlehem, Kalispell





Monday, November 30, 2020

PSALM 85

¹LORD, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. ²You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin. Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. ⁹Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. ¹⁰Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. ¹¹Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. ¹²The LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. ¹³Righteousness will go before him and will make a path for his steps.

My son and daughter-in-law recently came to visit us. Before they left home they were tested for COVID-19, both for their reassurance and for ours. We had not seen them for a few months and the first thing we did when we saw each other was hug one another. In these days of distancing and caution, we miss holding one another or even sharing a simple handshake. I am grateful for those who are making the wise choices to follow the protocols, even as I long for the day when we can touch one another again.

In Psalm 85 the people of God long to be in God's presence again and are given an abundant promise. Steadfast love (the very essence of God) and faithfulness (God's beloved children) will meet; righteousness (the character of God's people) and peace (the fulfillment of God's kingdom) will kiss each other. God has come near to us in Jesus Christ and holds us in God's embrace.

God has carried us through turmoil in the past and will do so again. As we wait to meet and hug one another, Christ comes to us, holding us with the steadfast love and peace of God.

Pastor Lynne Ogren

Zion Lutheran, Lewistown





Tuesday, December 1, 2020

Micah 5:1-5a

Zion is surrounded, enemies on every side. She feels lost, abandoned, defiled. She feels forgotten, but now is not the time to feel wasted. God calls for the marshalling of troops that look to the future with hope. Even though the battle of Chapter 4 and 5 is lost, even though Zion / Israel will be abandoned at this time they are to look to the future. From some tiny town named Bethlehem a mighty Messiah will be born in the line of David and Jacob and Israel will not be forgotten forever, just for now.

Not being forgotten forever leaves much to be desired. Certainly, this poem, which was written centuries before the coming of Christ, could bring a person to tears. God openly states that Israel / Zion is forgotten, they are lost to the battle they are fighting. Yet, Messiah will rise. The war is not lost, just the battle. And God gives room for the lamentation of the lost battle to come. God allows that hard times are here, but Messiah is coming. In Messiah you can rest in peace, even when the Assyrians are at the fortress gate. For now, Zion may be forgotten, but for eternity she will be remembered as the home of the Messiah who came for us all. We must simply wait for Messiah to come.

Let us pray: Dearest God, give us patience as we wait, embattled and broken, for Messiah to fill our hearts with light. Amen.

Pastor Marlow Carrels

Gold Hill, Butte





Wednesday, December 2, 2020

Isaiah 40:1-11

Isaiah 40 brings Handel's Messiah to mind. What great music!

Consider well these words from the prophet, these lyrics to the song:

"Prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

Have you, like me, thought the prophet promises a straight clear path FOR US? On closer look, we see that this is a highway for our God.

Why prepare this road for God?

So that God might have direct access to bring to you the comfort, love and salvation God desires for you.

God's strange and wondrous comfort, God's salvation that overcomes our waywardness.

"All people are grass. . . The grass withers, the flower fades. . ."

As fleeting as life might seem, as broken as we might be, God, who has created you, stands firm and loves you forever.

Your faithfulness might well be like a haystack, which is piled high one day, and devoured the next,

"but the word of our God will stand forever. . ."

God's abiding love for you stands fast, the promised one is coming to bear to you in his arms like a shepherd carrying a lamb in his bosom.

A promise well worth singing about, all season long.

Pastor Phil Wold

Trinity, Sheridan WY





Thursday, December 3, 2020

Hosea 6:1-6

When you've lost a parent, you remember what you did not do. The times you didn't call or visit when you could have. The teenage rebellions. The hurtful comments.

God's children in Israel did not do as God asked. It was a challenging relationship filled with disobedience and what could God do with such a people? What can a parent do with such a child? When the child is going through tough times? When cruel words are said, when doors are slammed, or the child doesn't call?

The last time I saw my mother was on the other side of a sliding glass door at her home. The door was open and I stayed outside as she and my father sat inside, and we talked.

I knew I was there as a child who hadn't come to visit as often as I could have. A teenager who had been irritated by my mother, sarcastic at times, withholding at others.

Throughout that afternoon, though, my mother watched me with a look of such full and abundant love it was hard to meet her eyes. I could feel her love physically, resting on me and I knew that I was sitting there not as the hurtful child, but as her beloved daughter.

What does God do with such a "turning away" people as us? "*He comes to us like the shower, like the spring rains that water the earth.*" And he looks on us with a fathomless love that forgives all.

Jenny Kunka

NRIT Director, Montana Synod





Friday, December 4, 2020

Acts 11:19-26

It was not part of the early disciples' plan to head to Antioch, and neither was it mine. I had planned to go to Damascus while I was studying abroad in Istanbul, but the Syrian border agents denied us entry. Stuck between Turkey and Syria, we turned toward Antioch (*Antakya* in Turkish), the closest city. That's how I ended up at the church where those unnamed but very brave believers preached the Good News to Greeks.

The church that once nurtured the faith of Paul, Barnabas, and countless Christians is now an echoing cave, a museum rather than a house of worship. Demographics changed; world historical events and cultural shifts transformed the landscape of faith in Antioch/*Antakya*. We're living in the midst of a cultural shift, too, and it will probably be easier to analyze once we're on the other side. Yet, whatever happens to our numbers or our buildings, the same foundation that cemented the faith of the 'first' Christians holds today: *the grace of God knows no boundaries – neither cultural nor political, neither pride nor plague*. God's world is awash in possibilities, and the Spirit joyfully leads us to '*ventures where we cannot see the end.*' Christ is coming in unlikely ways, at unlikely times – to living rooms turned into sanctuaries, to churches where pastors preach to a camera, even to echoing caves in Antioch. Plans change, but our hope in Christ stands firm.

Pastor Megan Hoewisch

First Lutheran, Havre





Saturday, December 5, 2020

2 Peter 3:8-15a

There are days in 2020 that have felt like they may as well have been a thousand years. If you are reading this, you have endured up to this point. Thanks be to God!

Our patience has been tried, most certainly. It will continue to be, for sure. God is working in God's own time, yet again. As always. Nothing — as we know it — lasts forever. Good and bad alike. What we know is but a cloudy vision at best of God's working through time and space.

But our senses tell us something. They tell us God is near even when God seems far off. We hear the whisper of the Spirit, "*Be still and know I am God,*" and the resounding voice of God's Word continues to sustain us.

The words of 2 Peter recognize our very normal and human perception that God may seem "slow."

Yet it is not our own patience with which we will be able to continue to endure.

It is God's eternal patience. With us. As we are.

May we find peace in God's promise while we wait, and relief that salvation is ours, just as God has always said it would be. Amen.

Pastor Sean Janssen

Messiah in Havre and Christ in Big Sandy





Second Sunday in Advent, December 6, 2020

Mark 1:1-8

My day always begins with an early morning walk. As winter comes upon us these walks are often cold and dark. On one such morning I couldn't help but to notice the white mist of my breath going before me.

This breath, I pondered, is the breath of God which speaks life into creation. This breath is God's Word, which from the beginning of time breathes meaning to our lives.

The Word is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus, the Christ. Jesus, whom we wait expectantly each day to reveal God's life giving love and forgiveness.

Pastor Audrey Rydbom

Pella Lutheran, Sidney





Monday, December 7, 2020

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

When I was a kid, the days of Advent often found my younger sister and me checking the growing assortment of gifts under the tree, to see whose name appeared on the most gift tags or on the biggest box. More than once, our parents reminded us, “*Good things come in small packages.*” It’s a lesson I find I need to learn over and over again: not to judge by appearances or be caught up in prevailing expectations. Sometimes the best gifts turned out to be the most unexpected and surprising.

In these verses of Isaiah 61, the unexpected is announced. The ones who will be called “*oaks of righteousness*” and “*the planting of the Lord to display his glory,*” the ones who will rebuild and repair all that has been devastated, are precisely the ones to whom the Lord’s anointed is sent: the oppressed, the brokenhearted, captives and prisoners, and those who mourn. (These words of the prophet Isaiah might sound familiar to you - it’s this passage that Jesus read in the synagogue in Nazareth, according to the fourth chapter of Luke.) After hearing good news, being bound up, receiving liberty and release and comfort, God’s people will be about the work of repair and justice, and be known as a people whom the Lord has blessed.

Let us pray. O Lord, bind up the brokenhearted, grant liberty to all who are captive, comfort all who mourn, and send me to share the good news of your justice and love. Amen

Pastor Lindean Barnett Christenson

Christ the King, Bozeman





Tuesday, December 8, 2020

Acts 11:1-9

Focus Verse: But I [Peter] replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'

It was a confusing time. Jesus crucified, risen, ascended into heaven. The disciples saddened as their original faith community rejected Christ's message; a complete break looking unavoidable. Shocked that the unfaithful and foreigners might be extended God's promises through Christ and included in the Beloved Community. What are the rules, when things have changed so much that it will never return to how it was?

In our uncertain times, perhaps we relate to Peter's reluctance to leave behind so much that mattered. *"By no means, Lord!"* There was *no way* he would eat what was forbidden *in God's own laws*. How will God transform Peter's broken heart at the loss of what *was* into a joyful hope of what *could be*? Through repetition of God's Word; the new rules and directions were there all along. The Spirit's voice is with Peter in the transition through grief, confusion, rejection, and anger until he finally welcomes Christ's future into his present. He eats and drinks with the foreigner. He baptizes him into the Beloved community.

To what transitions are you saying, "no way that can't be!" Where is God's Spirit present to comfort, challenge and guide you? What future is God giving to your present?

Prayer Concern: those going through transitions and loss.

Pastor Molly Sasser-Goehner

Immanuel, Missoula





Wednesday, December 9, 2020

Luke 1:5-17

⁵In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. ⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah and Elizabeth are "getting on in years." They must have wondered if God would ever answer their prayers and turn their disappointment into joy. Yet, they wait faithfully, performing duties until God's time comes.

Suddenly, in the midst of a "normal" day, an angel tells Zechariah his prayers will be answered. While God has always heard this couple, God also has an appointed time to fulfill their desires. Their answer is also the people's answer. John is destined to live and act for the world.

Faithful waiting means trusting that God's plans involve more than just our own. Our lives are not only for ourselves, but for the world. God has a purpose for each of us, and the ultimate in being generous, faithful stewards is living for others.

Perhaps Zechariah and Elizabeth wanted to keep their son for themselves. Yet, their desires are not exclusive from the needs of the people. Through John, they will witness God providing for them, and for the world.

Let us pray: Almighty God, help us trust your timing. Reveal to us the ways each of us is part of your larger kingdom and that in answering prayers, you often grant joy through us for the sake of the world. Amen.

Pastor Anna Merritt

Our Savior's, Great Falls





Thursday, December 10, 2020

Philippians 3:7-11

7-9 The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him. I didn't want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ—God's righteousness.

10-11 I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it.

Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. One thing COVID 19 has done for us is to show what is essential. Paul nails it, the most essential thing in our lives is to trust Jesus Christ – to know in our guts through our experience and our relationships, the love of God in the incarnation of Jesus. Love is the one force that knows no distance, no time constraints. Love is the force which keeps us together, connected despite differences, dis-ease - physical, mental or relational. It is what ultimately saves us from death. Paul realizes our best efforts will never be enough. Our striving for perfection ends up being a dead end.

During this Advent season we all long for post COVID 19 and post political chaos. We may not find all or any of the above, but in Christ we will find our center; what is essential and what gives life.

Pastor Christine Holler -Dinsmore
Spirit of Life, Poplar





Friday, December 11, 2020

Psalm 126

Restore our fortunes, O Lord! Perhaps not in those exact words, but in more crass exclamations, we have cried out throughout this past year for the Lord to act.

Bring back the comfort and freedom we knew pre-coronavirus!

Return us to a time when we sang as an assembly, loudly and gustily, at church!

Reinstate our luck and happiness while you are at it, Lord.

Restore our fortunes like the watercourses of the Negeb.

Lament is necessary. And what better time than Advent to cry out to God for help? Advent after all is when we wait and watch for God's unexpected coming into the world, here and now.

While we may cry out to God for restoration of former fortunes, generally God is up to *new* things in our lives and our world. If we look to the past, as the writer of Psalm 126 does, we will remember that God has acted before to turn our weeping into laughter, our tears into joy. Surely, God will do so again. So, we can proclaim our gratitude, even amidst our waiting and watching:

The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad indeed.

Pastor Miriam Schmidt

All Saints, Big Sky





Saturday, December 12, 2020

Luke 1:46-55 The Magnificat

I will never forget sitting in a church basement with our neighbors who came regularly to what we called Dinner Church. These were folks who came because they were hungry. Hungry for dinner, but also for fellowship and a glimpse of the hope God promises to “lowly” ones such as Mary. I wish you could have experienced the note of triumph in her voice, as a woman in her seventies, struggling to pay for both rent and food on her fixed income, read aloud: *“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”*

When we took turns sharing what we hoped God would magnify in our lives, prayers of thanksgiving and longing were spoken aloud: thank you God for my family; please God protect my son from bad influences; please God change the hearts of rich landlords who keep raising rent, so we don’t end up homeless; thank you God for this place where I feel safe and accepted.

Good news, abundance, and hope for the lowly is good news for the entire Body of Christ – even the rich and powerful.

Pastor Abigail Orellano

Christ Lutheran, Libby, MT





Third Sunday in Advent, December 13, 2020

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Advent is a season of expectation and anticipation. I expectantly await visits with family, favorite holiday treats and passing down our Christmas traditions to our two young sons. In church, I anticipate the great imagery and lessons that the liturgical calendar brings us through. These rituals are important parts of our Advent and Christmas rhythms that bring meaning to our celebrations.

But our text from John 1 also adds another important piece for the purpose of Advent. Chapter 1 quickly transitions from the creation prologue to zero in on a man named John. John it says, was a man sent by God. He was sent as a witness so that all may believe in this light that has come into the darkness of our world.

As I read through this passage, the words connected to discipleship jumped off the page. John was sent by God; Jesus sends his disciples including us. He came as a witness (martyr); we are called to be Jesus' witnesses. In fact, our author makes it very clear that John knew his role and lived into that mission. He was not the light, but he came to testify about the light.

The same role comes to us this Advent. In a year where we anticipate the promises that Advent brings even more, we are sent out to testify to that hope. Hope of the light that still shines bright even in the darkest of years. We are not the light, but we confess freely of the light that has broken into our world.

Pastor Jake Schumacher

Immanuel, Absarokee





Monday, December 14, 2020

Ephesians 6:10-17

The “*whole armor of God...*” The mental picture I have of God is absent of militant images. I’ve never conceived of God as one who does battle – at least not in the warring ways of humanity. We can be a fairly blood-thirsty lot in our pursuit of wealth and power and land and glory and... These aren’t things that God desires – especially if we confess that these are but dim images of that which God truly possesses. All of creation – seen and unseen, in the heavens above, and on the earth, and below the earth, all power and glory and honor and might – it’s all God’s and there is no foe who can snatch that away. So the “*whole armor of God*” image has struggled to take root in the soil of my spiritual landscape.

Until.

When my son was young, we would have Nerf gun wars in the basement (yes – I’m aware of the irony). I was dominating him in battle. He was hunkered behind the couch and I had him cornered. The standoff was palpable and tense. He was silent to my terms of surrender. As I closed in on him, with a confident roar, he burst from the shadows, bucket on his head, pillows tied around his body, a cushion as his shield. And in full armor, he faced me with courage and confidence and determination. His assurance stopped me in my tracks as he held his ground.

No. God doesn’t need the armor – but we do. For the battle isn’t against flesh and blood, nor is it for the gain of this world’s wealth. Rather it is the powers that are determined to corner us – discourage us – diminish and demean us. The powers that invite us to shrink and surrender to the sin prospered by the devil, the world and our sinful selves.

God is not the warrior – rather God is the loving parent who equips us to face the formidable foes that assail us every day. The spoils of this conflict are justice and mercy and compassion and truth and honesty – the true riches of the Kingdom of God. May you be equipped in every way so that you may be bold and courageous in these Advent days – as we await the Prince of Peace to redeem this world.

Pastor Darren Paulson

Atonement, Billings





Tuesday, December 15, 2020

2 Kings 2:9-22 ⁹When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." ¹⁰ He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." ¹¹ As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. ¹² Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. ¹³ He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. ¹⁴ He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over. ¹⁵ When the company of prophets who were at Jericho saw him at a distance, they declared, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha." They came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. ¹⁶ They said to him, "See now, we have fifty strong men among your servants; please let them go and seek your master; it may be that the spirit of the LORD has caught him up and thrown him down on some mountain or into some valley." He responded, "No, do not send them." ¹⁷ But when they urged him until he was ashamed, he said, "Send them." So they sent fifty men who searched for three days but did not find him. ¹⁸ When they came back to him (he had remained at Jericho), he said to them, "Did I not say to you, Do not go?" ¹⁹ Now the people of the city said to Elisha, "The location of this city is good, as my lord sees; but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful." ²⁰ He said, "Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it." So they brought it to him. ²¹ Then he went to the spring of water and threw the salt into it, and said, "Thus says the LORD, I have made this water wholesome; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it." ²² So the water has been wholesome to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke. (2Ki 2:9 NRS)

Advent – that time of looking forward with hope and expectation. Was that what the people were doing when they met Elisha after the ascension of Elijah? It just doesn't sound like it. They wanted to look back. They wanted things to be the way they were. Maybe they were used to having Elijah around and didn't want to get to know a new prophet. They weren't ready to look forward to a different future.

The future is always different than the past! I have always wondered when people have longed for the 'good old days.' Were they as good as we want to remember? Elijah was a bit of a complainer. At one point, he wanted to die rather than to go on as God's messenger to the people. He challenged the prophets of Baal, and it sounds like most of the people liked worshipping Baal. Did they like Elijah at the time, or were their memories better than the actual happenings?

And Elisha is there with them now. He is ready to take up where Elijah left off. God is talking with him, so that he can be the messenger that is needed. The future is cloudy, just like it always is. The people aren't alone – Elisha is there to take Elijah's place.

I hope that we, as people of 2020, can look forward with hope and learn to listen to the voices in our lives that direct us to God. In God, there is always hope!

Pastor Brenda Frelsi
Zion Lutheran, Glendive





Wednesday, December 16, 2020

Romans 16:25-27

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith — to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen. --

Generosity. Abundance. Hope. Appropriate and great themes for Advent and Christmas devotions! To be honest, at this particular moment in time, November 4, I am not feeling any of those things very much. I feel empty. And doubtful. Grumpy and stingy too. I am concerned that I am not enough – not strong enough or wise enough to face the days ahead.

And then I get this passage on which to write a devotion. And I am brought up short! *“Now it is God who is able to strengthen you...”* Why have I been relying on myself for strength and wisdom? I am quite sure that mine, on my own, will never be enough. But God’s strength? God’s wisdom? Never in short supply! If only I can be open to it.

The gospel of Paul, the proclamation of Jesus, and the command of God can and do bring about obedience of faith. Such a sweet, sweet promise! Faith means that I can tap into the One whose thoughts are greater than mine, whose strength is made perfect in weakness, my weakness.

In obedience, I surrender my fear of not being enough, and instead, look to Jesus who takes my not-enoughness in exchange for his extraordinary more-than-enoughness.

To God be the glory forever! Amen.

Pastor Valorie Putt

American, Chinook





Thursday, December 17, 2020

Hebrews 1:1-14

What is God saying?

The book of Hebrews is thought to be an extended sermon written to second generation Christians about the year 70 C.E. They had been holding out hope that Jesus was going to return any day. But, their hope was wearing thin as Jesus' absence lingered...to add to their anxiety, the world was going a bit crazy--- Christians were being killed and the Temple was destroyed by the Romans and the people were having a difficult time listening for God's word. And then the writer of Hebrews says this... *"Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a son."*

Our world, too, is going a bit crazy...the things we once knew to be true are being dismantled daily, yet, God has spoken a word of grace into the chaos...that word is the **WORD, Jesus Christ**. God is still speaking to you and to me over the clang and clatter of division and fear. Our Hope was born in a manger...the very image of God with us.

What is God saying? God is saying you are not alone. Amen.

Pastor Jason Asselstine

Associate to the Bishop, Montana Synod





Friday, December 18, 2020

Psalm 89: 1-4

Your love, God, is my song, and I'll sing it!
 I'm forever telling everyone how faithful you are.
 I'll never quit telling the story of your love—
 how you built the cosmos
 and guaranteed everything in it.

Your love has always been our lives' foundation,
 your fidelity has been the roof over our world.
 You once said, "I joined forces with my chosen leader,
 I pledged my word to my servant, David, saying,
 'Everyone descending from you is guaranteed life;
 I'll make your rule as solid and lasting as rock.'"

Psalm 89: 19-24

I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever;
 with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all
 generations.

I declare that your steadfast love is established forever;
 your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.
 You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
 I have sworn to my servant David: 'I will establish your
 descendants forever, and build your throne for all
 generations.'"

Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one, and said:
 "I have set the crown[a] on one who is mighty,
 I have exalted one chosen from the people.
 I have found my servant David;
 with my holy oil I have anointed him;
 my hand shall always remain with him;
 my arm also shall strengthen him.
 The enemy shall not outwit him,
 the wicked shall not humble him.
 My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him;
 and in my name his horn shall be exalted.

The season of Advent comes to us in this time of year when we are settling into the darkness of Winter. Rather than being something to fear, darkness brings with it the promise of regeneration. As the earth rests, seeds planted in readiness for the spring, so we might find this time a time of regeneration, of rest and reflection.

From the court of King David, Ethan the Ezrahite wrote these verses of reflection and contemplation. The theme of verse 1-4 is that of steadfast love and faithfulness. Verses 19-24 recall God's choosing of David and anointing him as King.

In the midst of the chaos and disruption in our lives that have marked this past year may we be reminded of "*Hesed*," the steadfast love of God. *Hesed* has been described as being like the love of a mother that cannot be lost. It has also been described as similar to the ferocious love of a mother Grizzly. *Hesed* defends at all cost.

In the midst of the chaos and disruption in on our lives may we be reminded of the faithfulness of God. God will never turn away or abandon but always seeks to make things new.

In the waiting of Advent we may look to the hope of the Christ child, the mystery of Christmas that announces a new creation, a new hope and a certain promise. In these days when we struggle to hold on and persevere in a time of pandemic may the ferocious love, steadfast faithfulness and promise of Christmas hope bring you hope and comfort.

Faithful God, be with us now in these Advent days bringing the hope and promise of your love and mercy. Amen

Pastor Arne Bergland

Our Redeemer's, Helena





Saturday, December 19, 2020

John 7:40-52

They were looking too low. Heads down, fingers pointing to the scripture, the religious leaders declared, “Look! It says right here. The Messiah is to come from David, from Bethlehem. No prophet, no Messiah could ever come from Galilee.”

Nicodemus knew better. Not so long before he had come to Jesus by night. And though he had walked away that night with his head spinning, he remembered much of what he had heard, what Jesus had taught. He recalled Jesus’ admonition, “*If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?*” Even more stunningly, Jesus added, “*No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.*” His mind whirled; they were looking too low.

In this season we look up. For the Word through whom all things came into being, who was God and who is God, became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.

Lord Jesus, let our eyes be fixed on you. Amen

Pastor Scott Hedegaard

Redeemer, Great Falls





Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 20, 2020

Luke 1:26-38

Recently my wife and I were remembering when we “found favor with God.”

We were living in Oregon and had been trying to have children for about three years. As anyone suffering infertility knows, the struggle with something that comes so “naturally” to others is an experience of guilt, anger, doubt and uncertainty.

We began walking down the pathway of seeking answers in our journey to expand our family. My wife, quite wisely, said it was like walking through Advent but not knowing if a baby would come. From that time onward, her comments have influenced my experience of this season as something we tend to celebrate with theological correctness but muted emotion.

As we recalled our personal story, I remembered the doctor pulling up the sonogram machine, holding my wife’s hand in hope and anticipation but also preparedness for more disappointment, when up popped an image of two little gummy bears with blinking lights at the center of them. The doctor said “Will you look at that!” to which we both said “Are there two?” and he said “Yes, you have twins.” We spent the next hours to weeks in fearful joy, delight, anticipation and nervousness. I remember my wife talking to our growing focus of love saying “hang on tight little ones.”

I don’t know what Mary felt as the angel came to her. I will never know what it is to carry life within me. However, while much gets made of Mary’s willingness to be the mother of God and we wonder at how she could say yes to what God had begun within her, my personal experience and my knowledge of Mary’s time makes me wonder if she wasn’t being prepared for this moment for a while. Maybe she also said “hang on tight little one.”

God’s amazing act in this light then becomes about an answer to prayer and a listening to the longing of the heart. It doesn’t mean everything will always turn out the way we hope, but if we live in the moment with God, it will turn out the way it needs to be.

Pastor Andy Wendle
Eidsvold, Somers





Monday, December 21, 2020

Isaiah 9:2-7

We have come to the darkest day of the year. For six months, the light has been fading slowly, often imperceptibly, as day by day the sun has made its journey south.

Yet this day is also a day of turning, for we know that it marks the time when slowly, often imperceptibly, the days will lengthen as day by day the sun makes its journey north. Light will begin to overcome the darkness.

The prophet declares, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.” In this season we await the coming of the Light of the World, the Promised One, who is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, who slowly, often imperceptibly, day by day brings light into our world and into our hearts, and the darkness will not overcome it.

Light of the World, let your light so shine on us and through us. Amen

Pastor Scott Hedegaard

Redeemer, Great Falls





Tuesday, December 22, 2020

Titus 2:11-14

The gift appeared at my house as a wonderful surprise, a beautiful handmade card of love from my sister-in-law. I had not done anything to earn it nor did it come at my request. It was simply a free gift of grace that appeared in my life, bringing me a glimpse of hope in a messy world.

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.” Take a moment to reflect on those times when the grace of God has appeared to you, bringing the light of God’s love and salvation to your life. How did that make you feel? Blessed? Hopeful? Grateful? Generous and willing to share the gift you have received? Perhaps all of the above and so much more.

In Christ, the light of God’s gift appears to us this Christmas season, a gift of the abundant new life we are promised through the power of the baby born to save us all. What generosity God shows us in this babe in the manger who grows up to die on a cross and rise again!

May God’s gift of salvation spill out so that you too are divinely zealous for deeds of goodness and love.

Bishop Laurie Jungling
Montana Synod





Wednesday, December 23, 2020

Zephaniah 3: 14-20

Sing, O daughter Zion! Rejoice and exult with all your heart!

All summer I received colorful photos of my family's garden. How I longed to join them. Yet the pandemic prohibited it. By the time I arrived in October the grandeur of the garden had passed. All the tomatoes, beans and squash had been harvested. Only dried-up sunflowers remained. They hunched over like weary shower heads.

Yet from the starkness of a spent garden came sweet singing. The children were gathering seeds. They plucked sunflower seeds and improvised a song: *"For birds or people or anybody... we're getting the rest of the seeds!"* One could not help but join in.

The people of Israel had departed from God's ways. Zephaniah was sent to deliver harsh news: soon this land will become stark, a place of destruction, wailing and death. Yet, in abundant mercy, God will preserve a remnant. They will eat and rest from their wounds. The prophet prompts their jubilation: *Sing loud! Rejoice!*

With that reversal, God cannot help but join in. The Holy One exults over them with singing! Then God gathers in the weak and the outcasts. The promise of life is made new.

Pray: Lord, when the horizon appears stark, renew us in your abundant mercy.

Pastor Barb Gwynn

First English, Great Falls





Thursday, December 24, 2020

Luke 2:1-14 – Christmas Eve

“I wouldn’t be caught dead in a place like that!”

We usually use that phrase when describing a location in time and space so loathsome and devoid of hope that there’s no way we’d want to be associated with it, let alone be found there. A team of oxen couldn’t drag us there. My reputation would be utterly destroyed if someone spotted me within a stone’s throw from that place.

The opening verses of the Christmas story set this kind of stage. Context is everything for understanding scripture, my seminary professors would tell me. And our verses open with a particularly regrettable context for God’s arrival into this world. We hear a couple names... Emperor Augustus, Quirinius (think of the opening scene in Star Wars where the Imperial Cruiser of the dark Empire oppressively rumbled overhead); and more pitiful details such as a vulnerable couple seeking shelter and finding little welcome so they took refuge in a barn and laid the newborn Christ-child in an oxen trough, and the first guests to welcome this newborn Lord of Lords and Prince of Peace are socially-marginalized shepherds.

In a place like that...

No, God was not caught dead in a place like that... rather God sought us out by sharing his life in that place! God’s reputation of hesed (steadfast love) was authenticated by arriving into that context. So, if you are ever convinced that there are places or situations in your life where God would fail to be revealed, think of the Christmas story. God shows up in your darkest moments – where fear or shame or regret, or despair, or rejection tries to convince us otherwise. Into that context – into your place – come songs of exultation from the heavenly hosts declaring to you,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!”

Darren Paulson

Atonement, Billings





Christmas Day, Friday, December 25, 2020

John 1:1-14

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (vs. 5) And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (vs. 14)

Most years at the Christmas Vaudeville show, the rendition of “*Christmas in the Trenches*” by John McCutchen would be sung. The song tells of one Christmas night in France during WWI. At a time when young soldiers didn't expect to celebrate Christmas, one young soldier began to sing Christmas carols, and soon more voices joined in from both sides, and a white flag was raised and soon the young men from both sides left the trenches and stood and sang together, exchanged pieces of candy and cigarettes and shared pictures of their loved ones back home. The unexpected and unscripted Christmas truce revealed that behind the weapons, each one was the same.

God, in the flesh, comes to meet us in our darkness, in the specificity of our humanity. Through the comfort of human relationship, in love of family and community, darkness is transformed. God's light shines into the darkness, even in this darkness in the midst of a pandemic, and the promise is that the darkness cannot, it will not overcome the light and hope and comfort of Christ!

O God of light, drive out the darkness of brokenness with your transforming light.

Pastor Peggy Paugh Leuzinger

Director for Evangelical Mission, Montana Synod





Saturday, December 26, 2020

Titus 3:4-7

These verses from Titus are one of the few places in Scripture that God appears to us as Trinity: God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit working as one in three, three in one to save us, restore us to holy relationship, and grant us rebirth and renewal. Here, in the “*water/washing*” of baptism, God pours the Holy Spirit “*out on us richly*” through Jesus Christ our Savior whose birth and life we celebrate this season.

What are things you do to remember your baptism? Perhaps it’s by dipping your finger in the font at worship. Perhaps it’s through a second birthday party on your baptism day. Perhaps it’s when you’re washing the dishes or standing under the pouring water in the shower or bathing your child.

On this second day of Christmas, we do not sing of two turtle doves but rather of the amazing abundance of new life poured out richly in our baptisms and in the loving kindness and generosity of God. And as heirs who share this new life with Christ, the Spirit inspires us to share God’s blessings with the world through works of generosity and true love in Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the Trinity who saved us all!

Bishop Laurie Jungling

Montana Synod





First Sunday of Christmas, December 27, 2020

Luke 2:22-40

Sometimes life is just overwhelming, and it is hard to see the blessings of life. This has been especially true for me in 2020, all year it just seems like the news is getting worse and worse. Finding the energy to do more than get by has been difficult.

Imagine for a minute being part of the Holy Family, and how chaotic life must have been for them. Mary miraculously pregnant, having to travel to a town far off, and giving birth surrounded by animals instead of loved ones. Frankly, I would be exhausted and probably focused on everything that had gone wrong with this pregnancy and birthing process. Despite everything seeming to go wrong during her pregnancy, Mary and Joseph took Jesus to Jerusalem for the purification rites as commanded by law. They offered their sacrifice and their thanks and praise.

Through their stewardship of God's blessing, Simeon and Anna recognized abundant blessings from God.

As we remember and celebrate the birth of the Messiah, let us remember that Jesus' entry into this world was chaotic and overwhelming. But let us also recognize God's abundant blessings in the midst of the chaos and share God's blessing with all.

Pastor Jayson Nicholson

Our Savior's, Laurel





Monday, December 28, 2020

Matthew 2:13-18 (Holy Innocents)

Even when we know the manger leads to the cross, it is hard to reconcile the needless deaths of children at any time, but particularly at Christmas. This passage is a bleak reminder that earthly powers and principalities consider nothing off limits to stop threats to their power.

Here is something to consider, though. Jesus' ministry ends up being funded by women. There are named and unnamed women, with their own money and familiar funds. Out of their pocketbooks, the disciples and others are able to eat and purchase necessary items. (Luke 8) What if there is a connection between their support and grief?

It seems likely that this group contained women who lost children in this slaughter. If not their own young sons, then nephews, cousins, or siblings. Grief remains and grief that accompanies senseless violence leaves deep wounds. Yet, we are a meaning-making people. It is possible that some of these women supported Jesus as a way to recognize what their own children might have done; become followers and disciples of Emmanuel.

We do not need to pretend our pain makes sense or to put pretty words around it. We can, however, lean on the everlasting arms of grace that will carry us to a time when we are able to be generous out of our grief, for the sake of Christ in the world.

Pastor Julia Seymour
Big Timber Lutheran, Big Timber





Tuesday, December 29, 2020

Isaiah 49:5-15

⁵And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength— ⁶he says, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” ⁷Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, “Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you. ⁸Thus says the Lord: In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people,[a] to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; ⁹saying to the prisoners, “Come out,” to those who are in darkness, “Show yourselves.” They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights[b] shall be their pasture; ¹⁰they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them. ¹¹And I will turn all my mountains into a road, and my highways shall be raised up. ¹²Lo, these shall come from far away, and lo, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene.[c] ¹³Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones. ¹⁴But Zion said, “The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.” ¹⁵Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.

How wonderful that Isaiah is told this message is not to whisper among one group of people but instead shared widely. Jesus continually says and proves that he is for all people and for all nations. He offers healing not only to men but also women, he eats not just with the rich but also the impoverished. God’s love for all nations does not begin with Jesus’s arrival on earth. Here in Isaiah, Isaiah is told that being a light to just Israel isn’t enough. These words are to be a light to all nations, to the end of the earth. Scripture frequently mentions God’s love, words, disciples being sent, to the ends of the earth or until the end of the age for all people, (*Isaiah 49:6, Matthew 28:20, Acts 1:8, John 3:16, Mark 16:15, Romans 1:16, Psalms 105:1*). These are that God’s love is not to be hoarded but instead carried throughout the world. This task is carried out by God as well as entrusted to the disciples, and to us. Isaiah is told he is a light not only to Israel, his message is meant for more than this one group of people. This example of God’s love shows the generous loving spirit of God, it also reminds us of who we are called to serve in the name of God.

Pastor Halcyon Bjornstad

New Life, Helena





Wednesday, December 30, 2020

Isaiah 40:1-11

Whoops! If I wanted to live in a place that looks ready for the coming of the Lord, where valleys shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill are made low, well, I should have stayed in Billings where I lived 20 years. Instead, in moving to Cody, the terrain is quite the opposite of what the prophet Isaiah describes as the highway for our God being prepared for us. While I love the beauty that surrounds me here, I long for the way of the Lord to be made straight and level in my own life. And that is what Isaiah promises us today, that God is always making a way for us, and speaking a tender word of comfort. This promise first came to God's people who found themselves in a place they did not want to be. In exile, they weren't doing what they wanted to do and they did not have a future that gave them hope. But this word met them and now us, in all the places we experience exile: comfort to you, my people, my child, your exile is coming to an end. I have a new future for you. And the glory of the Lord? It will be revealed even to you.

Pastor Kay Wittman

Trinity, Cody, WY





Thursday, December 31, 2020

Isaiah 61:10 - 62:3 10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

NRS Isaiah 62:1 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. 2 The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. 3 You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

As the year 2020 spins to a close, I share in Isaiah's announcement: *"I will rejoice greatly in the Lord!"* I see this hope filled rejoicing as a 'now and not yet' adventure. I rejoice now because God has given me people to love and even some who choose to love me. I rejoice now because amidst hard things God continues giving us comfort and the strength to comfort others. Indeed, God is at work now as a new future dawns each day and God finds a way to enact love, mercy, generosity, forgiveness, and justice. I also rejoice now because 2020 ends with the hope and promise that 2021 can be better. Covid-19 will eventually be conquered. Shuttered ministries and dampened relationships will have opportunity to grow anew. There will be a fresh start and new will life spring from what looks like barren soil. We end this year rejoicing because we look to the future with hope.

Isaiah's rejoicing, however, points beyond these present moments of years and decades to the fulfillment of long-awaited promises of God. Like Isaiah, we are clothed in the garments of salvation and righteousness through baptism. We too live by the promise that God's future has a direction in which God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up among all the nations. 2021 will come and go with rejoicing and sorrow, gladness and grief but on the horizon the salvation of our God beckons. God's kingdom will come, and God's will be done, in Jesus our salvation is sure. Let our lives be marked by celebration, for by faith we do not keep silent instead, we *'rejoice greatly in the Lord'* now and always.

Thanks be to God!

Pastor Ben Quanbeck
King of Glory, Billings





Friday, January 1, 2021

Luke 2:15-21

Entering into the New Year and reflecting on the year past, a prayer comes to mind that was delivered on the anniversary of Archbishop Oscar Romero's death. This is only a portion of the prayer, but it speaks to hope. The kind of hope that the birth of Jesus brought to the Shepherds so long ago.

A Future Not Our Own

It helps now and then to step back and take a long view. The Kingdom (of God) is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision.

This is what we are about. We plant seeds that one day will grow. We water the seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing this. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

Thanks be to God!

Pastor Chris Flohr

St. Paul, Missoula





Saturday, January 2, 2021

Philippians 2:5-11

Having the mind of Christ: The Apostle Paul writes, “*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus....*” and he goes on to describe what that mind is like. Scholars describe this passage as having the form of a hymn, words that wafted into the air as a gathering of believers joined their voices in song. These words have also been termed the “*great reversal*” – that in emptying oneself, one is filled, that in being humbled, one is exalted. Paul writes, being born in human likeness (a lowly child, sheltered in a manger), being found in human form, (welcomed by peasant parents, greeted by a smelly shepherd and a chorus of angels), Jesus humbled himself....

The recent elections in the U.S. has brought to the surface the pride, arrogance and hypocrisy of humanity (within all of us). We see again and again (as though we are looking in a mirror) the brokenness of the human condition and the need for healing. Jesus entered into this muck, into this world in which we are residents. And he was obedient, and he was strong enough to lay aside his strength to become weak, even to the point of death, so that every tongue might confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God!

Thanks be to God!

Pastor Peggy Paugh Leuzinger

Director for Evangelical Mission, Montana Synod





Second Sunday of Christmas, January 3, 2021

John 1:1-18

“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all the people.”

Life and Light. Those who live in more southern climates don't understand what it means to be stuck in the dark for months on end with little light and heat from the Sun. Don't get me wrong, I am not complaining about Winter in Montana, I need and enjoy the long nights after the endless days of productivity in the summer months; my body is tired. What is equally misunderstood is the joy that comes from the return of the light and the warmth of Spring and new life. Nothing brings awareness like depravity.

Both Light and Life seem to be in short supply these days. But the promise of new life buried under the winter snow gives us hope of a new beginning... A living hope that gives light to the present and allows the future to change our current reality.

Longing for light...we wait in darkness... Christ be our light.

Pastor Jason Asselstine

Associate to the Bishop, Montana Synod





Monday, January 4, 2021

Jeremiah 31:7-14

In some ways, 2020 was a year of separation.

Some of us found ourselves unable to see friends. Some couldn't visit family who live in care facilities. Others were separated from the in-person worship and fellowship of our faith communities. We've been separated from jobs, traditions, and more. We are even separated when we are in person as masks and social distancing for the love of our neighbor keep us physically apart.

The remnant of Israel experienced separation as well. They were separated from their homeland, from their loved ones. Life was challenging. Yet, even as they mourned their separation, they remained together, united by the one thing from which we can never be separated: the love of the Lord. And the Word of the Lord, spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, proclaimed that not only would they be gathered together, ransomed and redeemed, but that God would turn mourning into joy and bless them with grain and wine, oil and flock. God not only provided hope in the present, but the promise of future abundance.

It's a paradox that even as we experience separation, we are nonetheless joined together: across time, across space, even across the veil of life and death itself. We are joined by the love of a Savior who came to earth in the form of a baby, who died on a cross and rose again, and whose love brings new life each and every day. That love bridges any separation we experience, and not only sustains us, but promises life, and promises it abundantly. God's gifts to us may not look like grain and wine and oil, but they are even greater than that: a holy table, living water, and the hope of resurrection—not only for ourselves, but for all of creation.

Pastor Kimberly Peterson

Trinity, Choteau





Tuesday, January 5, 2021

Ephesians 1:3-14

One of the definitions of being an “*heir*” as found through a quick Google search is “*a person inheriting and continuing the legacy of a predecessor.*” In the Scripture for today we hear the proclamation that the followers of Jesus Christ will receive a great inheritance. For many of us when the term inheritance comes to mind, the first thing we think about is money. The inheritance in our reading seems to be a bit different. It is an inheritance of being redeemed through Christ. This redemption is one filled with love, grace, mercy, and full adoption into the family of God. As we walk through this Christmas season, we are asked to ponder how we as God’s people continue the legacy of Jesus Christ?

One piece of this legacy we have been left with is generosity. Paul explains the lavish generosity of Christ and reminds us that that generosity is for US! It is for our families, for our communities, for the complete strangers, and for the world. As we receive that incredible gift of grace, we are invited to gift it back into the world over and over and over again. What a legacy to be a part of!

Pastor Jessica Obrecht

Grace & St. Paul, Fairfield





The Day of Epiphany, Wednesday, January 6, 2021

Matthew 2:1-12

We all have a little bit of the Wise Men in us. Driven, perhaps mysteriously, to look for Jesus. Willing to risk something in the process, for the sake of the journey. We need to find him, and when we do perhaps we will have the wisdom to kneel before Emmanuel and offer him our treasures, and then to go home by another road, lest we betray him out of fear.

We all have a little bit of Herod in us as well. It is the part that seeks to preserve our power, whatever it may be, because God Come Down will always be a threat to earthly power. Gold. Skills. Knowledge (and what we think we know). Beauty. Time. Energy. Best laid plans. Titles and symbols of status. All the things we would choose to defend and keep for ourselves, rather than put them down before a little baby.

We find ourselves making the same choice as the Wise Men and Herod. When we go looking for Jesus . . . when we follow that star . . . we will not have far to look, because we will always find Jesus right next to us, waiting for us to kneel down.

Pastor Amanda Liggett

Zion, Roundup & American, Lavina

