

JUSTIFIED AND JUST

SAVED AND SENT BY
THE COMING CHRIST

ADVENT
DEVOTIONS
FOR 2022

GRACE
LU⁺HERAN
CHURCH
& SCHOOL

How does what God has done for us lead us to live in the this world?

That question is at the heart of these devotions. In Advent, we await the coming of Christmas as we await the return of Christ. In Advent, we hear comforting words of hope and hard words of judgment. In Advent, we see God doing a new thing. This new thing, the coming of Christ, changes everything. In him, we are saved. By him, we are called. Those who have been justified are called to enact justice. These pages are a testament to the many ways that the people of God at Grace Lutheran Church take seriously both the message and the mission.

I pray that these devotions will be a blessing in your prayer life this season. Each was composed by a layperson who is part of the Grace community. We often hear from the pastors (especially me!). This season, we lift up the voices of the laity.

Thanks are due to Mike Berg, who designed the imagery for these devotions; Brendha Klaus, for her valuable assistant with proofreading; and Julie Hinz, for shepherding this project from beginning to end. Thank you.

Come, Lord Jesus!

In hope,

Dave Lyle

Senior Pastor

Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. Matthew 24:42

Matthew urges us to keep awake. But why? Is it essential to our salvation that we not be sleeping when the Lord returns? We all know that sleep is healing, necessary for our day-to-day well-being. So why are told to stay awake?

This “awakeness” harkens me back to my teenage years when my father could not fall completely asleep until all of us were safely at home. It’s not that he sat awake waiting but that, knowing the dangers that exist in the world, he could not truly rest until we were under the protection of home. This is how God waits for us; not with fear but with anticipation.

The reality is, we do not know the moment of Jesus’ return will come, but Matthew points out the secret to living in this unknown: live the present moment well. Be aware of God in the here and now. Do His work now. Bring Advent light, anticipation, and joy, into each moment.

“Keeping awake” is an invitation to keep our eyes open, to recognize the signs of God's presence in history and in our daily lives. It is an awareness of the needs of the world and an invitation to meet those needs as well as we are able, every moment, so people enveloped by a sense of darkness might find their way to the light.

Uncertainty about the when of Jesus’ coming should draw us into continuous expectation, prompt us to love others today and not tomorrow, forgive now and not later, face injustice wherever and whenever we encounter it, with justice. Every moment should be spent transforming the reality of this very moment — not just when we find time in our schedule — into God’s kingdom on earth.

Faithful God, who waits patiently for us to return to you, keep us awake to the needs of the world, that each day we live to your glory and the redemption of the world. Amen.

*He shall judge between the nations
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;
neither shall they learn war any more. Isaiah 2:4*

When one reads this, an obvious response is OH MY. How can it be that there will no longer be weapons of war? How can it be that nations will not fight each other? Obviously, universal peace is desirable – who would argue against such – but peace between nations?

Recent events such as the invasion of Ukraine suggest that world leaders are not in tune with this verse. Is this a result of not consulting with Church leaders and other learned individuals? I suggest not. The Russian Orthodox Church is highly supportive of war against Ukraine. Other Church leaders condemn it. How can it be that leaders within the same faith community are disagreeing? Are some leaders listening to God and others not? Only God can judge.

This verse provides an argument for pacifism which was utilized successfully by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Conscientious objectors say instead of war we should use dialogue and other non-violent means to arrive at solutions for our differences. Critics suggest that dialog of this nature is unrealistic. In fact, they point out that appeasement before World War II did not prevent war. The fact that discussions between opponents is not always successful does not mean we should give up. The Camp David Accords, the Dayton Agreement, and the Good Friday Agreement are examples of agreements that led to peace after years of conflict. If only we could have agreements for peace before wars start.

Much is occurring locally in support of justice and peace. Many inside and outside of Grace are actively involved in our extended communities to aid the less fortunate and support justice and equality. This non-violent activism demonstrates our love for all people, just as Jesus showed His love to all.

I am reminded of the song Jesus loves the little children. The first verse states "...all the children of the world, red, brown, yellow, black, and white, ..." Maybe we should replace "the little children" with "all the people." If we each adopted the philosophy that all are created equally, we might begin to experience a greater degree of peace.

Oh Lord, may all seek your guidance as we attempt to resolve issues of conflict. May we continue to advocate for justice and peace for all irrespective of race, color, gender, or religion. Amen.

*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
"May they prosper who love you.
Peace be within your walls
and security within your towers. Psalm 122:6-7*

Psalm 122 describes the pilgrimage of God's people back to Jerusalem after a generation living in exile in Babylon. It makes me reflect on the pilgrimage we are making in our return to in-person worship. When I enter our sanctuary, the color and light of the stained glass gives me a sense of tranquility and awe. Of course, there is peace within this stone structure. Yet the passage nudges me to reconsider: "Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces."

The Jerusalem that the psalmist writes about returning to was not idyllic. Researching the text, I found that Jerusalem, like the world we live in now, had a history of slavery, heavy taxes, extremes of poverty and wealth, and injustice.

In "Our Jerusalem," conflict is familiar. The pandemic heightened the inequities and disparities in our world. Our nation is at war (with ourselves) over culture and politics. We are accustomed to living with a constant simmer of division. Peace and prosperity for everyone seem like lofty and unattainable goals.

The passage reminds me we have work to do on our pilgrimage; to make a difference at Grace and the world beyond. Our Jerusalem extends beyond our stone walls, more than twenty blocks to Austin, Lawndale, Woodlawn, to rural Illinois and Indiana, and beyond the nation's border. While my world includes people and perspectives with whom I vehemently disagree, the passage nudges me and calls me to pray for all of God's people and our combined justice, peace, and prosperity.

God, guide us in our return to Jerusalem. Help us build a sanctuary at Grace that is welcoming to others and where we can start the real work of building a community of God that brings justice and peace to our world. Amen.

The night is far gone; the day is near.

Let us then throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Romans 13:12

My grandparent's old Indiana home was nestled in the woods. Not the middle-of-nowhere woods you'd find in the countryside but wooded enough where the sky above had but a sliver of the glow from the city lights. Whenever I visited, I was reminded of how dark true darkness could be. The kind of dark that penetrates your eyes, blankets your skin, makes you shuffle inch by inch on your way to the door. That leaves you feeling frightened, vulnerable, helpless. And we experience this darkness daily. Whether it be warfare, racial inequity, a tainted relationship or a loss, our lives are constantly encompassed by the shadows. At points we feel so lost and defeated that we simply cannot move forward. So, where do we turn? How are we to traverse through the works of darkness? For that, we look to the light.

God is our armor of light, a light that never flickers or wanes or dies. A light that shines brighter the further we stray from its source. When we accept God as our true light, the "works of darkness" carry no merit, assert no jurisdiction over our lives. Like roaches to a bulb, they scatter and hide.

So then, with this reassurance, we are called to spread God's grace, to don the armor of light and serve one another as a beacon for love, for kindness, and for compassion. Darkness and suffering will always exist; it's a reality we must accept. However, by the love of God and by our acts of service through Him, the darkness can be kept at bay and the light will always win.

So, the next time you attend worship and see the eternal flame dancing at the altar, remember God's undying light and the promise of protection and love through Him.

God of deliverance, lead our lives with growth and understanding so that we may turn to you in the face of darkness and appreciate your acts of kindness and compassion through your children on Earth. Amen.

*Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked. Psalm 82:3-4*

Imperatives

Give, maintain, rescue, deliver — these imperative verbs are the first things I noticed in these verses from Psalm 82. Imperative verbs are commands or directions, and the subject of the verbs — *who* should do these things — is implied: it's *you*, the person being spoken to.

Children hear lots of imperatives: wake up, do your homework, practice your piano lesson. The authority of parents and teachers stands behind these directives, and these adults also help children fulfill them.

Who is issuing the commands in Psalm 82? No surprise, it's God, who has ultimate authority to judge the earth, "for all the nations belong to you!" (v. 8).

So where does God's authority come from? And how and where do I recognize God's authority? I know from catechism lessons that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, present everywhere. But how does God's awesome and overwhelming power connect me to caring for the weak and the needy?

I feel God's pull on my heart and my actions most when I consider God as Creator, the One who spoke into being a world where all can flourish. That world is broken by human willfulness, but God's love for me makes me want to respond wholeheartedly to the command to give justice and to care for the weak and needy. God has given me an example to follow in Jesus, who entered human brokenness in order to restore the relationship between creatures and Creator. And God's daily grace brings me joy, humility and wisdom as I strive to be part of the redemption of all creation.

Creating and redeeming God, help me live for others every day, bringing your love to all. Amen.

*But let justice roll down like water
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Amos 5:24*

Around 750 BCE, the prophet Amos delivered his message to the people of Israel. Amos was uncompromising in his message that God would soon come to judge people for their sins. Therefore, it was not sufficient to confine religious observance to ritual and worship without compassion for others.

This verse is one of Martin Luther King's most quoted, appearing in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail in 1963 and five months later in his "I Have a Dream" speech. It is no surprise how these words confront indifference to racism and discrimination. The words are universal and transparent and reflect the profound ethical nature of God. We are called to seek justice and be righteous.

How do these words relate to our daily life in this suffering world?

First, we can do more than passively lament injustice. Biblical justice is not impartial but focuses on helping the helpless and the oppressed. Giving our time, talent, and resources to serve those in need is central to our faith. There are many opportunities to engage at Grace Church and the wider Christian community.

Second, being righteous is how we relate to and treat others. It is a high calling to love and respect others, particularly in this time of stark divisions. The word righteous is distinctly different from "being right" and requires humility.

We are in Advent and a season of hope. The words of Amos demanding justice and fairness are not all that different from Jesus's words in Matthew 22:37-40 telling us to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Good and gracious God, we have fallen short in this unjust world. We seek your help to live our lives according to your will. Help us have compassion, mercy, and grace for others so they may know your love. Open our eyes to injustice and help us work for the helpless and needy. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

*Yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law
but through the faith of Jesus Christ.*

*And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus,
so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ
and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.
But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners,
is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! Galatians 2:16-17*

The first verse of this passage is very familiar to me. The second, less so. Together, they make me think about being a Christian in the world: specifically, the knowledge that my actions reflect on Jesus Christ, and on my siblings in Christ.

It is a daunting thought! And arrogant, perhaps. How could the actions of one person reflect on the entire body of Christian people, much less on the Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth? And yet, you may meet people who have never interacted with a person who self-identifies as a Christian—or, more likely (and more sadly) have never had a *positive* interaction with people who call themselves Christian. If the people you meet each day, friends and loved ones and total strangers, knew nothing about Jesus Christ except that someone like you believed in and followed Him, would that change how you treated them? How so?

This is a tricky road to walk. Too easily, we can get caught up in putting on a Christian *appearance*, hiding our sins instead of facing them. Such attempts to paper over sins can beget even graver ones.

And they are unnecessary. Galatians 2:17 says it: the fact that we are sinners does not make Christ a minister of sin. To the contrary, by acknowledging our sins with humility, facing them with courage, and working to heal the damage of sin writ large in the world, we show the true power of God's gifts. Such works do not save us. But through them, we can reflect some small fraction of the light that God shines upon us. In this Advent season and always, let us shine.

*Lord, help me live in such a way that those You place in my path will see Your light through me.
Amen.*

*But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them,
“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?
Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance.” Matthew 3:7-8*

In preceding verses, we find John the Baptist in the process of baptizing repentant Jews as part of a traditional cleansing ritual. In doing so, he is preparing his people for the arrival of Christ who will also require an acknowledgment of sin and repentance. Strolling onto the scene are the Pharisees and Sadducees. These two groups could not have been more different in their beliefs – but they both see the risk of a captivating new set of religious paradigms: Love and Forgiveness. They have come to check out the competition.

At this point three things happen. John calls them a brood of vipers, he implies that they will be included in the coming wrath of God and then this final imperative: “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”

These are the words that still ring true for us today. As Christians we are often reminded to bear fruit according to our gifts. This is not a difficult thing for most of us. But the “in keeping with repentance” part is more of a challenge. As we bear fruit – helping others, giving generously, clothing, and feeding the poor, welcoming the homeless, and more – John reminds us it is only by keeping our own unworthiness as part of the equation that we can serve others bearing fruit in keeping with our repentance. We are humbled by reflecting on our own sin, repentance, forgiveness. We find joy in complete justification – being found righteous in the sight of God. Now we are ready to do good – to bear fruit with our eyes focused on the God who forgives, redeems, and justifies.

Forgiving God, we are thankful for the continuous forgiveness you offer. Remind us to humbly help others in light of our own shortcomings. Help us to reflect spiritual joy as we live out the promise of the justified. Amen.

*The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed together,
and a little child shall lead them. Isaiah 11:6*

At its essence, Isaiah 11:6 demonstrates how opposing forces may work together toward a common goal. As a psychologist, I draw upon this fundamental lesson daily when having to support the many children, adolescents, and adults who bring their myriad of perspectives, cultures, parenting styles, and political and religious beliefs to each session in our work together. Oftentimes, these varied perspectives differ dramatically from my own. Nevertheless, I take it as a fundamental imperative to listen to their side of the story – how they perceive the world and their specific circumstances.

As a psychologist you are trained to listen to the underlying messages that your clients share with you. There is no room to let your personal judgments, opinions, or life events cloud your understanding of another's experiences and feelings. While it is important to acknowledge your own personal beliefs and perceptions, your focus is on the needs and concerns of others. The desire to "teach" or "preach" something as basic as the "golden rule" is often tempting, yet the best approach is to simply listen. It is this empathy and willingness to listen that lays the foundation for understanding and acceptance.

Isaiah's words have many applications, not least of which is our current political culture writ large. It seems almost impossible that our politicians and their supporters would unite under one common goal, one in which we strive collaboratively for the betterment of the country. Indeed, it may feel easier to throw up our hands and resign ourselves to this situation. Yet Isaiah's words offer us hope and direction. He shows us that even perceived enemies can live together peacefully through understanding, respect, and "knowledge of the Lord."

I call on you, dear Jesus. Please help to guide me to listen to and to understand the needs, feelings, and experiences of others. Allow me to be open, to hear, and to empathize with others, especially those that may see things very differently from my own perspective. Teach me, dear Jesus, so that through this work we can learn to create a more peaceful, accepting, and loving world. Amen.

*May he judge your people with righteousness
and your poor with justice. Psalm 72:2*

We entered the small waiting area at the Chicago Police Department (CPD) Headquarters and took our seats. I was there to comply with the Murder Registry law. I had asked Pastor Lueking to join me, wearing his clerical collar. He understood – without explanation – my reason for the request. He was there to enhance my prospects for receiving just treatment.

While we waited, a CPD officer announced that proof of address was required. One man stated that since his release from prison he was homeless. “That’s your problem,” barked the officer, but before he left, Pastor Lueking became that man’s advocate, questioning why the registration could not occur and the verification be done later. In fact, that’s precisely how the law is written.

The officer was taken aback by Pastor Lueking’s intervention, but noticed his age, race, and clerical collar, and knew he couldn’t ignore or dismiss him.

He told the man to go to a Chicago shelter and return with an address. Pastor Lueking asked which shelter and how the man could go and return that day, via public transportation, with no cash. His question went unanswered as we were called in to register. I received just treatment that day, thanks to Pastor Lueking. And, I think, the other man at least left that day feeling that someone valued him enough to stand up for him.

That’s how I’ve experienced justice over the years; not from the systems designed and empowered to provide it, but from God’s servants in this world; frequently from unexpected sources like the juror who expressed her concern for my safety; fellow prisoners who stood up against those who would harm me.

Over the years, I’ve often observed: “The world crucified Christ! Why should I expect better treatment.” In Jesus, who experienced the ultimate injustice, I find not just sympathy for the injustices I have experienced, but empathy. That has motivated me to help others achieve whatever measure of justice we could extract from society. In my view, that’s what Jesus’ sacrifice is all about.

Dear Lord, open our eyes to the many forms of injustice in this world, help us to overcome apathy, and show us how we can play a role in bring justice to those who so desperately need it. In Jesus name, amen.

*Welcome one another, therefore,
just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. Romans 15:7*

When we were new to Oak Park a man came by one summer day as we worked in our yard. He offered to help us out as he could use some work. This started a year's long relationship with Carl, an unhoused gentleman, down on his luck, who'd made some poor choices in life for which he was now paying the consequences. Carl was a hard worker. Every few weeks he'd come by to ask if he could mow or rake our yard, shovel snow in the winter, or offer any other help. We came to enjoy his company. Once while eating a meal in our dining room, he noticed our piano and asked if he could play. Turns out, Carl was an organist at his church and at one point had been ordained as a minister. He invited us to hear him guest preach and play.

So, one summer Sunday, our family headed to Chicago's west side to Carl's church. With a little bit of awkwardness, uncertain of what we would find, we entered the back doors, hoping to sneak into the back pew and blend in. Well, there was no chance of that. As soon as we walked in, several parishioners immediately ushered us to the front of the church, practically hugging us the whole way down the aisle. The joy with which they welcomed us was something I had never experienced at church before. They wanted to know all about us, about the kids, and were genuine in asking how they could pray for us. It was an amazing experience that we will never forget. We participated in the service, listened to Carl's sermon and organ music, and joined in the joyful dancing and celebration of music.

I think about that Sunday all the time. How welcoming am I in my home and church life? Do I make an effort to reach out to anyone I meet, with loving arms, like those dear sisters and brothers did for us? As much as I wanted to say yes to those questions, I knew the answer was too often "no". Paul put it simply. "Welcome one another as Christ welcomed you". It can be a challenging command, that I hope to obey better and more fully.

Lord, forgive me when I fail to be as welcoming as you ask me to be. Help me to extend your welcome to all with whom I encounter, without condition. Amen.

*Mighty King, lover of justice,
you have established equity;
you have executed justice
and righteousness in Jacob. Psalm 99:4*

Psalm 99:4 begins by asserting “The King (the Lord) is mighty,” meaning all powerful. That the Lord “loves justice,” meaning equitable and loving treatment on our part with our fellow human beings and with everything on our beautiful planet.

The psalm continues by saying “In Jacob you (the Lord) have done what is just and right.” I believe that this means that despite Jacob’s cunning and his deceitful treatment of his brother Esau, stealing Esau’s birthright and their father’s deathbed blessing promised to Esau the Lord let Jacob know “I am with you” at which time Jacob vowed to “return all things to God.” Four powerful, thought-provoking words: “I am with you.”

Jacob, having become changed and renewed, went on to become the Biblical Patriarch of the Israelites. Like Jacob I believe our fundamental mission in life is to strive to get close to God. How do we do that? By also striving to do what is just and right.

Blessings and opportunities have been bestowed upon me beyond counting. Loving family, health, encouragement, and good examples on how best to live from my elders, teachers, and acquaintances. Life challenges have also come my way. Disappointments, loss, failure, and shortcomings on my part. But through it all in my mind and heart I have lived knowing God’s words: “I am with you.”

So how can I not help but live a life trying my best to live as I have come to know God directs? So, in turn I must also try to be another good example, to give encouragement and give support to others as I am able. To attend and to stay involved at church.

Lord, help me try to be grateful for all you have graciously given me in this wonderful life. Help me continue to strive to live as I have come to know you and to discern your directions for me. Grant me the strength and the wisdom to continue to love and to serve like Christ. Amen.

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8*

In the book of Micah, God condemns the people of Israel for breaking the covenant God made with them when God led them out of Egypt. The rulers of Israel have become corrupt; they "abhor justice and pervert all equity...."

"Its rulers give judgment for a bribe
its priests teach for a price;
its prophets give oracles for money."

After God makes his case against Israel, the people ask if God will be pleased "with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?"

But God has no need for ostentatious sacrifices. Those sacrifices are an attempt by the people to demonstrate their righteousness. Instead, God requires the people to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

When we walk humbly with God, we make God the center of our lives. God walks beside us, sometimes carrying us, but always with us. It is only when we start to live for ourselves, putting ourselves before others, that we begin to feel the absence of God. God is still there, but our own willfulness and pride blind us to God's presence.

For us, God made the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus, given unto death for the redemption of our sins. In return we are called to live for others, to look beyond ourselves and give out of the abundance we have been given.

In this Advent season of preparation for the birth of Jesus, we remember that the Son of God was born into humility, laid in a manger, raised, and nurtured by a poor but blessed woman. He lived his life reaching out to the poor and the outcast, rebuking the rich and the powerful, and giving comfort to the sick and the oppressed. Let us live to follow Christ's example in our dealings with others, and to strive to do justice in an unjust world.

Gracious God, teach us to walk humbly with you. Guide our actions so that they may benefit others and be a reflection of your justice. Amen.

*But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed
and is attested by the Law and the Prophets,
the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ
for all who believe. Romans 3:21-22b*

The apostle Paul was a tireless crusader for the Gospel. He wanted God's redemption story to be told! God's gift of love so freely given! For you! For me!

Paul was absolutely certain of his message to the early Christians. He reminds me of an itinerant firebrand preacher setting up a large tent each night in different locales, welcoming sinners near and far. "God loves you! Christ died for you! You are saved!"

He wrote to the Christians in Rome, "You, my friends, are part of this story! We have all been rescued, Jew and Gentile! The Law can no longer separate us. God's love has broken the bonds of sin. We are powerless, unable to rise above it all alone. Through Christ we are made new. God's liberating act of grace has released us!"

Today, a life of faith emboldens us to live faithfully in our communities. We open our arms to welcome those less fortunate and those in desperate need of kindness. We seek ways to share God's message of "good news." As we form new relationships, we need not point fingers, clutter our conversations with judgments, or isolate groups by closing doors and building walls. The law weighs us down. Thankfully, Christ has shown us a better way!

The season of Advent begins. In the midst of darkness we seek light. As sinners we are promised hope - a Messiah. In faith we live as forgiven children of God.

Dear God, thank you for your gift of life. Keep me strong in my faith in the midst of distractions during this busy season. Amen

And they said to him [Jesus], "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

*Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John [the Baptist] what you hear and see:
the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear,
the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. Matthew 11:3b-5*

John's question is key to our faith. Jesus could have answered simply, "I am he." Instead, Jesus uses examples to teach them, and us, to be observant, thoughtful, and introspective. Implicit in his answer, Jesus instructs us to keep an open mind as we observe, think, and consider our lives.

Some questions come to mind: How have we gotten where we are? What pieces of life's puzzle came together to assist? How or where did we meet the people who turned out to be mentors? What doors of opportunity suddenly appeared and opened?

When I look back at my life, I am often amazed at how circumstances came together - in my professional careers and in my personal life. Twists and turns I could not have imagined have placed me where I am. If I had tried to write a script for my life, the story would not have been as interesting or wonderful as my life has turned out. The script would probably have been pretty boring. I could not have imagined the breadth of experiences or opportunities that I have had and that have shaped me. I did not accomplish those things on my own.

As I look back, I believe through my faith in God, that Jesus was watching over me, leading me, and providing and opening opportunities for me. The Lord's script of my life was far better than anything I could have ever imagined.

Lord, bless us with the humility to recognize that we cannot accomplish things on our own. Keep us aware of the world around us. Strengthen our faith that you are always with us. Amen.

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf shall be opened;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert. Isaiah 35:5-6*

These verses are full of reversals, seeming impossibilities, and upendings of reality as we thought we knew it. Isaiah gives us images of disabilities healed in miraculous and jubilant fashion. God's reality flies in the face of our utterly reasonable expectations. These images, however, are deferred or conditional: *then* the eyes of the blind shall be opened, *then* the lame shall leap like a deer. These things will not happen unless or until something happens.

So, what is God waiting for? What do these miracles depend on? We are all impatient for restoration or wholeness of some kind. "Then," Isaiah says. Why not now? What will it take to bring all of this to pass?

Isaiah gives us cause and effect but a little bit backwards. *Then* the eyes of the blind shall be opened, *for* waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. What brings about this renewal is water where we never expected to find it.

In the driest, most inhospitable places in our lives, where we need it most and expect it least, God can refresh and sustain us and turn our expectations upside down. There are times, of course, when we might see no sign of these miraculous streams. In the waters of baptism, however, God has claimed us as his own forever and makes us whole. Likewise, Jesus has accomplished each of the miracles in these verses and then some. If the blind can see, the deaf hear, and the lame leap, then why couldn't the dead rise, the sins of the world be forgiven? These assurances are no guarantee against infirmity, suffering, or the various deserts of our lives, but as we live in faith and hope for the impossibilities that God can and has made real, our words and actions can become just such sources of unexpected joy and healing to others.

Dear Lord, refresh the deserts and wildernesses in our lives and give us hope for your reversal of our expectations. Help us to bring this same hope to others. Amen.

*Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry. Psalm 146:5-7*

Happy. What exactly does this mean? This concept of happiness has been studied for decades. Is it an economic measure? Psychological, emotional, or even a moral state? Does the accumulation of things make us happy or is it in relationships or careers that we find it? How do we find happiness in a world filled with hunger, poverty, death, disease, oppression, discrimination, corrupt leadership, hate? It seems there is not much to be happy about when we look “out there.”

Just two verses earlier, the psalmist tells us “Do not put your faith in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.” There is not much to be happy about in this world and our leaders will not help us find it. Great. So, where do I find this illusive happiness?

There is only one place. Beyond riots, racism, violence, destructive forces of nature; our happiness come from God. Our God, who provides justice for the oppressed, fills the hungry with good things, opens the eyes of the blind, and keeps the promises made since the beginning of time is our joy, our hope, and our ultimate happiness.

Life is never easy, sin is ever-present. But beyond the ills of the world, God remains faithful in all things. That is where happiness lay, in the arms and at the feet of Jesus.

And this? It makes everything different. We no longer live in fear or dread. There is no need to dwell on the evils around us. We see the hurting and tend to the wounded. We face the hard things of life with grace and hope, knowing that no matter the outcome, God’s hand is upon our lives. It is that relationship that brings joy and through us, God’s will is done. There is no greater happiness.

Gracious God, remind us daily that our happiness can never come from the things of this world, but solely from you. Amen.

*You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.
Brothers and sisters, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged.
See, the Judge is standing at the doors! James 5:8-9*

It too often feels like the oppressors are winning and injustice won't be punished. There is so much suffering in the world. James is acknowledging the pain the world inflicts on itself but he's also offering us hope. He encourages us to be patient and strengthen our hearts, because we know that through Christ all will be made right. But what do we do while we wait? We are not passively waiting while God's people suffer. Instead, God calls us to actively work with each other toward a more just world. At a time when it's easy to feel divided we are warned to not grumble against one another. Do not fight or blame or point fingers. Instead use the blessing of each other to do more of God's good work in the world. Find what connects us and, from that common place, we can do even more good in the world.

Dear God, give us strength and patience while we wait. Help us to continue fighting for what is right in the world and help us to find common ground, so that we may be stronger together. Amen.

*He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes,
with the princes of his people. Psalm 113:7-8*

My sixth-grade teacher, Miss Miller, told us kids at Grace School that we should order our lives around the word "JOY". "J" is for Jesus; "O" is for Others; and "Y" is for "Yourself".

Great advice. Jesus says "Follow me." When faced with poverty, racism, sexism and so many other "isms", as followers of Jesus, we must ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do?" Jesus tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

In dealing with our neighbors – that's all of humankind – Jesus takes it a step further and tells us that if we do good to "the least of these," we do it to Jesus. In today's devotional reading, the psalmist points to this when the psalmist writes that the Lord picks up the poor from the dirt, rescues the forgotten who have been thrown out with the trash, and seats these outcasts among the honored guests. What does Jesus say – the last shall be first and the first shall be last – which seems very counterintuitive by worldly standards.

We are called to be God's hands and feet at work in the world. We are called to lift up the poor and comfort the broken hearted. As Father Greg Boyle states, "And so the voices at the margins get heard and the circle of compassion widens."

So how should we live? The Methodist saying in the prayer tells us.

Gracious and loving God, help us 'to do all the good we can, by all the means we can, in all the ways we can, in all the places we can, at all the times we can, to all the people we can, as long as we can.' In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

*For I, the LORD, love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Isaiah 61:8*

God always does what is right and just and wants us to love justice as well. He expects us to interact with Him and others in a just manner. Through his Son we have been given the perfect example of how to justly respond to whatever we encounter. Our Savior suffered great injustice at the hands of political and religious leaders and even some of those who followed him. Jesus, however, showed mercy and willingness to forgive. Thankfully, when we act unjustly toward others, God hears our prayers of repentance and looks with mercy on us and gives us grace.

Isaiah then provides a specific sin. The verse states the obvious, God “*hates robbery*” but then says “*for burnt offerings.*” For example, using the proceeds of a theft to show our love for God just compounds the iniquity. God rejects the donation to a charitable organization that comes from stolen money or the tithe that was made possible by cheating on taxes. Giving such “*offerings*” makes God an accessory to our theft.

God will identify those activities that we should do in His name. He promises to lead us and help us to serve with sincerity.

We know the promises God made to the Israelites. Believers embrace a covenant from God as well. Romans 3:23-24 tells us “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*”

Being eternally grateful for the unmerited favor God shows us allows us to step out confidently in his service.

Merciful Father, help us to be your servant and to perform works that bring you delight. We pray for the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives that we might bring justice and peace to all. Amen.

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing;
it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.
For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works,
which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them. Ephesians 2:8-10*

Most Christians know that Ephesians 2:8-9 captured Martin Luther's attention and led him to reforms in the church, ultimately resulting in the Reformation. "By grace you are saved" is preached and taught in the Lutheran tradition from the beginning of each person's faith journey. That's half the point of this Advent's devotion theme, "Justified and Just: Saved and Sent by the Coming Christ."

Paul did not stop at salvation, however. The coming Christ saves us from bondage to sin and death, freeing us to serve "the other." That's the exhortation in verse 10. Because we have been saved we are transformed and an outcome of that transformation is good works. Paul goes on in his letter to share how we are to live.

Luther also composed a treatise titled "The Freedom of a Christian." As Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton of the ELCA puts it, "he offered his most compelling summary of the Christian life: In Christ we are completely free and at the same time completely bound in love and service to our neighbors."

You see this love and service here at Grace Church in our coat drives, sandwich making, food walks, peace and justice advocacy, benevolences, and on and on. "Christian individuals do not live in themselves but in Christ and their neighbor," Luther wrote.

Eaton adds that "as in Luther's day, our faithful response to the uncertainty and death-dealing forces in our world is to proclaim that which is sure and life-giving for all. Freed in Christ, we resist the temptation to turn inward in despair by turning outward in love and service to the world." With the Christ child's arrival, we can let our lights shine.

Thank you, generous God, for the gift of grace, the gift of faith, the gift of salvation, and most of all, the gift of Jesus. Amen

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Matthew 1:20-21

Jesus is on the way! How exciting!

But not for Joseph. He learns Mary, his betrothed, is pregnant. He knows the baby is not his, and is certainly feeling betrayal, confusion, and heartache. Just before the angel visits, Joseph has decided to quietly divorce Mary, so as not to bring shame upon her. Joseph truly cares for Mary and his decision is fueled by his love and compassion. Historians tell us that if he had chosen a more public shaming, Mary may have been put to death for adultery.

I shiver to think about it.

Thankfully, the angel comes to put Joseph's mind at ease. Joseph takes Mary as his wife. Simply put, Mary gives birth to Jesus and Jesus saves us from our sins. Just as the angel said.

Every day I thank God for his love and the love of his only son, Jesus Christ. What a gift he has given to all of us: a love like no other.

As I move about in the world and in my life, I try to live compassionately and love others as God has shown me through Jesus. I feel truly blessed by God in my life, but I see so many who are hungry, poor, and homeless, discriminated against for their color or who they love or where they come from, or who are victims of injustice. It's heartbreaking.

I believe we are all called to do more to help others, to show compassion, and to show everyone God's love.

Dear Lord, I pray in thanksgiving for the birth of your son, Jesus Christ, who died to save us from our sins. Your love is the greatest gift of all. I thank you for giving your love to us and pray that we can give it to others through our words and deeds. Amen.

*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign.
Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son
and shall name him Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14*

At first blush, this passage seems to lack any connection to our question of how God's saving act changes how we live our lives. So, let's step back just a bit.

The prophet Isaiah saw the world differently "The word that Isaiah, son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem." (2:1) Isaiah *knew visions*, saw God's word, *translated* God's intentions for people to understand. These word choices are not random but Isaiah's own neon sign that screamed "Prophet!" to the world.

The language throughout Isaiah boldly reveals the bleeding wounds of Israel, a desolate country, cities burned, Jerusalem besieged by its enemies and the abhorrent behavior of its inhabitants – "Crushing people, by grinding the face of the poor," their haughtiness, their self-importance, etc.

God is angry. Isaiah sees that God is angry. Isaiah sees Judah's complicity and how Jerusalem has become a place of injustice. It seems right to expect words of condemnation, the proclaiming of the consequences of sinful behavior.

But Isaiah starts with something more powerful and more important. Hope. "*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.*" In Matthew (1:23) we learn that Immanuel means "God is with us."

While Isaiah is addressing the sinfulness of Judah's here and now, his words are far reaching into our future. He (and we) must also face the destructive forces of the world and, like him, we must begin with hope. Only through the hope of this "God-with-us" can Isaiah (or we) create and sustain any systems of justice for the fallen people of God.

This "God-with-us" is hope in desperate times. The Babe is named as the one with authority to establish justice with righteousness, the one who brings hope. Immanuel grants us freedom from the chains of sin so we might live according to God's vision for justice. Now, we can breathe in the hope of salvation and breathe out justice into our fallen world.

Gracious God, you have brought hope for the world through Jesus. Remind us of this hope and the freedom it brings for us to serve with your love and bring your justice to the world. Amen.

*Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved. Psalm 80:7*

Restoration. What a powerful word. Life has a way of beating you down and battering your heart. We are created so full of expectation and hope, yet we constantly struggle to find the peace and purpose. God, in his great goodness and mercy shines his face on us. He draws us close to him when we least deserve it. He provides us rest from the mess of our lives and from ourselves.

This Advent season, salvation and restoration are close. God is our refuge, our comfort in times of trouble. Restoration is what happens when we land in God's grace. He restores our hope, our heart, our will to survive. He redeems our purpose and gives the circumstances of our life new meaning.

Life brings hardships. They are unavoidable. I can see how the struggles I have encountered were for a divine purpose. They have shaped who I am, and who God wants me to be. I can now share and offer the wisdom of those experiences to others as they work toward restoration in their own seasons of suffering. The quality of our suffering can determine the beauty of our gratitude. Our moments of sorrow have the potential to deepen those seasons of splendor. How do you view your pain? Is it the road to your peace? Does it drive you to Jesus? Is it the cross to your restoration? May you look to your road with great expectation this advent season. May you carefully embrace and savor your journey, all the parts and all the bumps. May God be real, and deep, and potent in your life, today and every day forward.

Dearest Lord and Savior, you are the one who gives us life, and breath and meaning. May we always look to you for our renewed sense of purpose. May we see your salvation and restoration in everything you do, everything that happens to us, and every road that lies ahead. Help us to be more of who you designed us to be, and may we decide to be more and more like you. Give us eyes to see the work you are doing in our lives, today and always. In Christ's precious name we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, December 21

Bill Koehne

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 1:7

Going through Confirmation or maybe even earlier, many of us memorized the verse, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Ephesians 2:8-9. This verse served as the theme for our school during the 2021-22 school year. As I read today's verse from Romans, I thought of this verse as well.

When we think of the Coming Christ during this Advent season the focus tends to be on the baby Jesus born in a stable and placed in a manger. We don't often think of the end game, Jesus' death on the cross. That is something I love about the Children's Christmas Eve service at Grace. Every year, for nearly 75 years, the service begins with carols sung by our students while standing in the form of a cross. It portrays the full story. The message, that we are justified by faith through the death of our Savior on the cross, is front and center.

Paul reminds us of this message in the Ephesians verse above and in our verse for today from Romans.

In the Gospels we learn over and over of the love Jesus has for his followers. Our faith grows as we see this love and the power of the Spirit playing out in our lives. In our faith, we understand that we have been made righteous by the power of God's saving love. And with this righteousness firmly planted in our hearts we are sent out to serve. What a wonderful cycle that occurs when we feed our faith and allow the Spirit to work within us.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the seed of faith that you planted in me. Help me today to live my life firmly rooted in your righteousness. Amen.

*He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty. Luke 1:53*

“He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.” (Luke 1:53). So sings teenage Mary, pregnant with the Savior of the World. It is a part of the Magnificat, her rhapsody about being chosen so shockingly to become an indispensable player in the great story of salvation – the transition from Law to Gospel.

Young Mary is saying that, in choosing a woman of “low estate” for this exalted role, God is being powerfully consistent. In Mary’s heritage, God has always insisted on social justice, a responsible sharing of resources. His prophets consistently laid down the law against wealthy and powerful exploiters. For example, in the famous words of the prophet Amos, addressed to the rich and powerful people he criticizes for exploiting the poor, “Hate evil, love good, and establish justice in the gate! ... let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Mary says that her own elevation echoes this consistent theme about the justice God wants and models: he fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty. This is not a punishment for the rich just because they are rich; it is a declaration that justice – that God – prioritizes those who have little. And it is a lesson for us who have plenty but seek more, and who thus thwart God’s consistent insistence that we do justice with our power and resources. Mary is swept away in admiration for this principle of the law, but she also has a glimmer of the transition from Law to Gospel. God is great for demanding justice, and He is even greater for bringing into her womb and thence into the world the Agent of forgiveness for the failure of all of us to deliver it. That forgiveness gives us peace. And that peace gives us gratitude and courage to work for justice.

Dear Lord: Thank you for your gift of peace that comes from forgiveness. Be with us as we seek to work for justice in your world. Amen.

*And the king will answer them,
'Truly I tell you, just as you did it
to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine,
you did it to me.'* Matthew 25:40

To set the context of Jesus' words in Matthew 25:31-46, the king—Jesus—is speaking in verse 40 to those people—the sheep—separated from the goats by the king and placed at his right hand. The king commends those who, in caring for “the least of these who are members of my family,” by feeding the hungry, providing drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and the imprisoned, cared also for the king. This contrasts with the king's condemnation spoken later in the passage those people—the goats on his left—who failed to care for the hungry or thirsty, the stranger, the naked, or the sick or imprisoned, and, in so failing to care for “the least of these,” failed also to care for the King.

Difficult and challenging words by Jesus!

Jesus' words are a call to each of us, as disciples of Jesus. We need to always recall the Good News we have received and in which we hope: we are saved by faith in Christ, through God's reconciling work of love, revealed in Jesus' life, death on the Cross, and Resurrection. But our faith in Christ should be neither lifeless nor loveless, but rather, as Paul states in Galatians 5:6, a “faith working in love.” We are called by Jesus to love God and love and serve others, even those sometimes hard-to-love people who are “the least of these.” Praise God that, in His love and grace, He grants us the power to love, broken vessels that we are. God also grants us the Church, a family of brothers and sisters in Christ. We are called both to love our brothers and sisters in Christ and, together with our brothers and sisters, to love and serve others, even the “least of these!”

Jesus' words in Matthew 25:40 are comfort for us, as disciples. Each of us suffers in various ways. The truth is that, however we try to shield ourselves, suffering is and will be an unavoidable, sometimes seemingly overwhelming, part of our lives. Jesus, the King, wholly and completely identifies with and is close to those members of His family who suffer—that includes us, as adopted sons and daughters of God. We can take comfort that, however deep our suffering and pain, Jesus, through his identification with suffering humanity, is and will always be there with and for us. That is Good News!

We thank you God for your great grace and love. May our faith in You be a living and active faith marked by love and service to others, including the “least of these who are members of your family.” We thank you that, in and through the living Christ, You identify and always are with us in our own trials and suffering. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

*But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid,
for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:
to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. Luke 2:10-11*

We have a message of spectacular rescue: the love of God has rescued us from the wrath of God. Christmas is about the Creator of the universe, coming himself, in the person of his Son, into the world that he made.

Hundreds of times in the Bible, God is either called Savior or speaks of saving his people. God's act of grace in response to our sin is the heart of the good news. But it isn't the end of the story. When Jesus appeared to his disciples following his resurrection, he gave them a mission. "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." (John 20:21)

God sent Jesus to be our Savior, but God was not finished sending. As disciples of Jesus, we also are sent into the world to proclaim that good news of great joy, that God has come to redeem and restore his creation. Do you know what we call sent people? We call them missionaries.

This is your new gospel identity as a follower of Jesus Christ. You are a missionary. You might think, "I'm not a missionary. Missionaries travel across the world." However, if you look up "missionary" in the dictionary, it just means "one sent on a mission."

We are sent as missionaries to our family, neighborhood, workplace, schools, and every other sphere of life. In other words, we're given a mission to reach the people around us, wherever we are with the good news of great joy.

Everyone God saves, God sends. The result of our reconciliation is we are also entrusted with the mission to implore others to be reconciled to God. Where have you been sent?

Savior, send us as your missionaries to share your good news of great joy. Amen.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it. John 1:5

The basic question of these last weeks of reflection has been “how the reality of this Babe in a manger that we celebrate today, change how I live my life on a day-to-day basis?”

My gut response is often “I’m not sure it does. This is just who I am and what I do.” But dig a little deeper, push that annoying “why?” as far as possible and I discover that when I was very young, someone – parent, grandparent, teacher, mentor – taught me that Jesus loved me so much he became human to save me from death. And not just me but everybody else. So, I GET to love everybody else without hesitation. That message stuck.


Today, shaped by time, wisdom, and experience, that lesson has been honed, focused, and hopefully projected more deeply and broadly than before. As we discover who we are and begin exploring our own gifts we find that the Light of that tiny Babe has been implanted into our own hearts; our own ways of being have become conduits for that infant Light to shine into the world.

Every time we reach out a hand to help or bring joy, comfort, laughter, provide food, drink, clothing when they are needed; every time we engage in conversation with our neighbor or sit with the hurting; every time we gather as the body of Christ or faithfully tend to our vocations; every time we rejoice in who God created us to be and use the fullness of gifts given us, that holy Light shines out.

And what happens when there is light? There is no more darkness. Darkness cannot exist where there is light. When you and I allow the Christmas Light to shine out through us into the world simply by being God’s people in our every-day lives, the darkness flees. Light spreads.

May you go into the world boldly shining the Light of Christ into every dark and hurting corner of the world.

Lord God, continue to kindle your Christmas light in the hearts of your people. Remind us that this light is to be shared throughout our darkened world and, living our lives in you, we are beacons of Your love and hope to a world in need. Amen.



May the peace and joy
of the Christ Child
dwell in your hearts
now and always.

From Grace Lutheran Church and School