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12-2-2018

2018 Advent Devotional

Christian Jones

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, jonesc@csl.edu

Austin Wellhousen

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, wellhousena@csl.edu

Justin Cullen

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, cullenj@csl.edu

David Edwards

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, edwardsd@csl.edu

Benjamin Hayter

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, hayterb@csl.edu

See next page for additional authors

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Recommended Citation

Jones, Christian; Wellhousen, Austin; Cullen, Justin; Edwards, David; Hayter, Benjamin; Geraci, Coleman; Weight, Caleb; Muldowney, Brian; Will, Kyle; Thormodson, Ian; Fink, Samuel; Fredstrom, Will; Wellik, Bradley; Gonzalez, Nicholas; Maser, Ryan; Lahue, Alex; Bolosan, Chad; Witt Duarte, Alvaro; Moffitt, Gregory; Rodriguez, Adam; and Scheele, Luke, "2018 Advent Devotional" (2018). *Other Student Publications*. 15.

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Authors

Christian Jones, Austin Wellhousen, Justin Cullen, David Edwards, Benjamin Hayter, Coleman Geraci, Caleb Weight, Brian Muldowney, Kyle Will, Ian Thormodson, Samuel Fink, Will Fredstrom, Bradley Wellik, Nicholas Gonzalez, Ryan Maser, Alex Lahue, Chad Bolosan, Alvaro Witt Duarte, Gregory Moffitt, Adam Rodriguez, and Luke Scheele

And the angel said to them,

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

(Luke 2:10-11 ESV)



2018 Advent Devotions

By the students of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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Sunday, December 2nd

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Christian Jones

Devotion

And so we begin - we wait and we listen. Advent is a time of waiting and anticipation. "Behold, the days are coming," Jeremiah says when all that has been prophesied and all that we have waited and longed for will be fulfilled. The days are coming soon.

In a mere 23 days, we will celebrate with all the saints as we commemorate Jesus' birth in that lowly manger, but for now we wait. We long for our favorite Christmas carols and hymns, but now we wait with our advent songs and services; and, week by week our anticipation will build. Yet, we also wait for another unprecedented moment: His return.

We can count down the days until Christmas on our advent wreaths and calendars, but we do not have an answer as to when He will return and come again. We wait with one eye open - an eye on the sky - because we do not know when He will return, but we know that He will. Soon.

On that day, it will be better than any Christmas morning would could ever anticipate. The gift of perfect, new creation with the new heavens and the new earth, and His *New Jerusalem* descending from those heavens. The river of life will be flowing, and the tree of life will be bearing fruit. Jesus Christ, the Messiah found in that lowly manger, will be sitting upon the throne with splendor and glory; and, He will be our righteousness...

... but now we wait. We wait and we listen; for, even in our waiting, His Word dwells with us now in great anticipation.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we eagerly await to celebrate the birth of Your Son, Jesus, teach us to eagerly await His coming again. In His name we pray. Amen.

Monday, December 3rd

Psalms 25:1-10

Austin Wellhousen

Devotion

Waiting is hard. Take it from me...I'm a Detroit Lions fan. I, like all Lions fans, have been waiting 61 years for the Lions to win an NFL championship. As the days and the years fade away it gets easier and easier to doubt if my patience will ever be rewarded.

Of course, waiting for something like an NFL championship is nothing compared to what others wait for. I can't imagine what it must be like to wait for a loved one to return home from deployment or wait to hear the news if the cancer has finally faded away.

The difficult reality is that waiting comes with following the Triune God. Even after God made his promise to Abraham, Abraham still had to wait for the birth of Isaac. Moses had to wait in the desert 40 years before he could finally glimpse the Promised Land. Israel waited for their promised savior to appear.

From the beginning, God's people were characterized by waiting. The good news is their waiting was not in vain. The long-awaited Messiah would arrive as God promised. Many years before this child arrived, King David knew patience in the Lord's promise is always rewarded. Psalm 25:3 says, "None who wait for the Lord shall be put to shame..."

As painful as it is to wait, we know waiting in God's promises will one day reap an eternal glory beyond all measure. So, in this season of Advent, let us wait. Let us wait for our Savior who loves us more than we know to come again. Let us wait, because our waiting will not be put to shame.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, give us the strength to patiently wait for the fulfillment of your promises. As David reminds us, let us know our waiting will not be put to shame. Your Son came to us once, and He's coming again to restore us along with the world. Let this be our heart's desire. Amen.

Tuesday, December 4th

*Isaiah 2:1-5
Justin Cullen*

Devotion

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Sometimes what we seek after is not always clear to us. We have expectations in our minds of how something is supposed to look, whether that is a test score, a doctor's appointment, or a new car. When we are given the results, or the news from the doctor, or take that test drive, our expectations and dreams are suddenly pushed aside as reality takes over. Blinded by our own presuppositions and ideals, we realize how far from the truth we really were.

So it is with those who first saw Jesus in his public ministry. They had no idea who this man was, or what he was up to. The miraculous things that he did, the healing of the blind, the cleansing of the lepers, the raising of the dead, were all events and activities that those who sought the Messiah had least expected. The flowery dreams and mystical visions of a dominant King who was to usher in the

Kingdom of God came in a lowly carpenter from Nazareth who spent his time among the outcast. He was born in a stable, died an innocent death on the cross, and was buried in a borrowed tomb. Even His resurrection to new life caught His own disciples by surprise.

This Advent, how are you blinded by your own expectations? Are you distracted by the things of life that surround you? Are you enveloped by how you envision Jesus to be in your life, or are you resting in the faith of what Christ came into the world to do for you at the Cross and the promise of his second coming?

Prayer

Most Holy God, grant us the clarity and vision to see Jesus as who He really is, the Son of God who came into the world to die and rise again for you. In His name we pray, amen.

Wednesday, December 5th

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

David Edwards

Devotion

You know how sometimes you come into a conversation at the wrong time? You hear the last thing someone says and it's either surprisingly offensive or unexpectedly passionate? Right, so that's sort of the case with the text for today's devotion. You won't really understand the weight—the gravity—of Paul's words unless you start back at the beginning of his letter. So, go head and read that now...seriously...I'll wait...Ok, now that you've read, starting from chapter one, you see that there is some pretty intense stuff going on. The Thessalonian Christians are experiencing persecution at the same time Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy have been "torn away" from them. In response, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy are desperately trying to get back to them, but they're repeatedly held back by Satan. Finally they send Timothy on ahead and he gets some good news.

Timothy is able to reach the Thessalonians and report back that, in the face of persecution, their "faith and love" has been sustained. In our text, Paul is rejoicing that these Christians have not fallen away, despite the hardships they're facing. This hit me as being sort of...unusual. I mean, it seems like so often the encouragement comes after the failure, trying to get someone back on track, but here's Paul encouraging them in the midst of great success.

As Christians in America today we don't face the kind of persecution Paul's first hearers did, but there all sorts of reasons to grow weak in "faith and love". Let's not wait until the weakness becomes despair or crippling doubt. Let's rejoice for each other—with each other—in times of strong faith and selfless love.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us to encourage each other and ask Your blessing upon one another with confidence in Your name, to sustain us till the end, till the day when Christ returns. Amen.

Thursday, December 6th

Luke 19:28-40
Benjamin Hayter

Devotion

We find ourselves at the beginning of the Church year, in Advent. And yet today we find ourselves not looking to the baby that is to come in the manger, but the adult Jesus entering Jerusalem to be crowned king. Instead of the true beginning of the story we start at the beginning of the end. Like a child peeking at his presents before it is even Christmas, today, we look ahead at what is to come. Some say that peeking ruins the experience of the gift giving. Yet, I ask, how can we receive the baby Christ without looking ahead to what he will do and what he will become for us?

Jesus first came to us humbly as a baby laid in a manger. He came without pomp or circumstance, and only angels worshiped the king of the universe. In our reading Jesus comes to Jerusalem humbly, riding on a donkey. His disciples praise him as a king because of his miracles, but they do not know what is to come. They are expecting a joyous celebration of the Passover with the man they want to be their king. Little do they know that in just six days Jesus will become their Passover lamb.

This Advent let the shadow of the cross be just as visible to you as it was for Jesus as he entered Jerusalem for the last time. Wonder not only at the fact that God would become man, but that it would be his purpose to die for you. For this baby who came to us humbly in a manger humbled himself to the point of death on a cross, and through his death was crowned king over all

Prayer

Father, let the shadow of the cross cover this time of Advent, and the entirety of this new Church year, that we might always be guided by Your Son, our crucified Lord, Jesus. In His name we pray. Amen.

Friday, December 7th

Isaiah 64:1-9
Coleman Geraci

Devotion

Reflect on the awesome things of God. Isaiah tells us that God does awesome things that we did not look for. The awesome things that we did not expect when God ripped open the heavens and came down to us. This rending of the heavens was not in a display of fire and power, but entering into our world as babe in a manger. Hidden underneath the cuteness of a newborn was the Creator of the world.

Advent calls us to reflect on the awesome things that we did not look for when this babe grew up righteous and sinless - full of wisdom, grace, and favor; when the heavens were opened and a dove anointed Him as the one who works joyfully in righteousness - the Beloved Son of God. There, at His baptism He identified Himself with the people who had been in their sins a long time. He identified Himself as the one who would bear the sins of the world away.

We reflect on the awesome things that we did not look for when this man rode on a colt into Jerusalem; when He gave Himself over into the hands of sinners to be beaten and flogged; when He went willingly to the Cross. We reflect on the awesome things we did not look for hidden in that Cross, hidden in the suffering Jesus, where the sins of the world were paid for - where our salvation was secured.

We are called to reflect on the awesome things we did not look for when God raised to Himself one to take hold of God -when the stone quaked away and Jesus walked out from the grave; when He appeared to the disciples and gave them the command to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in His name.

We are called to reflect upon the awesome things that we did not look for in what He has done to us. The awesome things where the promises of Calvary and the empty tomb meet us: in our baptism – where the Word of promise, hidden in the water, declares us as God’s own child; in the Lord’s Supper, where His own Body and Blood given for us, forgives and renews us.

In this season of Advent, we are called to reflect upon the awesome things that we did not look for. Reflect on the awesome things of God.

Prayer

Most Awesome God, give us the eyes to look at and gaze upon the wonders You have accomplished for us, so that we might even more fully understand Your love and compassion. In Jesus name we pray, amen.

Saturday, December 8th

Luke 21:25-36

Caleb Weight

Devotion

Just turn on your TV. What do you want to watch? Netflix? Hulu? Amazon? Or maybe the news? Any of them, all of them show a world of chaos. When looking around all that is seen is wars, violence, protests, genocide, starvation, injustice, natural disasters, and the list goes on. When considering the world, the chaos, the disorder that has reared its ugly head, it is easy to hear the words of Jesus being spoken in Luke 21, “There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

One thing that seems to be true, is the end is certainly coming soon. That Jesus is certainly coming back again. We just don’t know when but the signs are there. This though, is the Christian life. Advent. The Christian life only makes sense when living as if Christ’s return is imminent. The Christian life, is a life of looking for signs, and watching for the Son of Man to return, and bring about the new creation.

So, this Advent season, some might find themselves lamenting all the bad in the world. Well, this is a reminder that Christians are Advent people. Watching and waiting in anticipation for the coming return of Christ. So find peace in that promise, that Christ is coming, and He is certainly coming soon.

Prayer

So we pray, E’en so Lord Jesus, quickly come. Amen.

Sunday, December 9th

Malachi 3:1-7
Brian Muldowney

Devotion

“How shall we return?” I pray that this Advent has been a blessed one so far for all of us. And yet, as the days get shorter and the temperatures drop, Christmas gets closer and closer. Our Savior is coming, a bare child, wrapped in rags, nestled amongst hay, laying in a feeding trough. For our lives today, and maybe even for the lives of all sinners, God’s plan of salvation for humanity seems ludicrous when it’s pictured as a helpless baby living in a barn. And so we search our own lives for the answer. “How shall we return?” How will we return to God in the midst of our own mistakes, our own faults, and our own failures? The world answers with money, things, accumulation.

Things will make you happy. Modern sensibility responds to our question saying that morality is the answer. But God, He knows better. The only way that we may return to God is through the Babe in the manger. The only way we may continue to grow as Christians is through Christ. And yet, as Christ’s people, we often fall back into our own sinfulness, seeking out our own salvation. So, this Advent, I encourage you to continue to look to Christ alone, the Babe in the manger, as our one true Savior. Even though we continue to stumble and fall, even though we keep asking ourselves “How shall we return?”, Christ remains. After all, the days are getting shorter, the temperature keeps dropping, and Christmas is coming.

Prayer

Jesus Christ, You came, You remain and You abide with us. Focus our hearts, minds, and actions that we might return and remain with You. In Your name we pray, amen.

Monday, December 10th

Psalm 66:1-12
Christian Jones

Devotion

Are you ready? Are you prepared? As you wait in expectation for Christmas day, have you thought about the preparations you have made for when the Son of God returns – beyond a “welcome home” sandwich board and a fruit basket?

The coming Son of God has done mighty deeds for you, and this should shape the way you live. This is not an argument suggesting or proclaiming that your works earn you salvation; but, on that day when the Son of God and Man returns, will you be able to look back on your life and say with great confidence that you carried the burden He laid on your back – that you accomplished the good works that He prepared for you to do in advance? You should be preparing yourself.

On that last day, Jesus Christ – God, Himself – will be returning in glory. He already has a Tree that bears twelve kinds of fruit, so He will not *need* your fruit basket; but, your neighbor does.

Prayer

Almighty Father, You have prepared good works for your people to do. Give me the focus and drive to do what the good work you have prepared for me to accomplish, as I eagerly await the return of Your Son. In His name, Jesus, I pray – amen.

Tuesday, December 11th

Malachi 4:1-6

Kyle Will

Devotion

Picture yourself working outside. It's the middle of the day. The sun is shining bright overhead. Do you welcome the sunshine and its beams of warm light? Or is the sun an oppressive source of sweat and misery for you? It's simple enough to imagine that on a sticky and hot July afternoon we would want nothing more than the sun to go away. Likewise in the middle of a chilly and windy winter morning we wish that the sun could stay high in the noon sky as long as possible.

Malachi uses the ideas of heat and sunlight to make a very simple point about the great and terrible Day of Yahweh. Judgement day will be terrible day for those who do evil. This same judgement day will be a great day for those who fear and love the name of Yahweh. The Day of Yahweh will bring fire, destruction and damnation to the impenitent sinner. The same Day of Yahweh will bring restoration and healing to those who repent and turn to the sun of righteousness-- Jesus Christ.

As we await judgement day, the day when Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead, we do not need to be stricken with terror at the thought of the great and terrible day. We have been purchased and won by the blood of Jesus on the cross. Our evil thoughts and deeds have been forgotten. Our names are sealed in the Lamb's book of life. We are no longer enemies of God, marked for destruction, but we are God's treasured possession. Therefore when we hear that the day of judgement is coming soon-- that Jesus is coming soon-- our response should always be "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."

So what about the people who do not know Jesus? You might even be thinking of somebody right now who doesn't know Jesus or doesn't believe that they need to be forgiven by Him. Is there any way for them to escape the coming judgement? There is not. Just as it is impossible to hide from the light and heat of the noonday sun, it will be impossible to hide from God's judgement. However, there is still time. The judgment is coming, but as of now it is still coming. As in, it has yet to come. So what can we do for the people we love who don't know Jesus? We tell them about Jesus. Tell them why they need Jesus. Tell them what Jesus has done for them. Don't leave them in the cold. Give them a chance to know and be warmed by the sun of righteousness.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, even as the entire church on earth eagerly awaits your return and as the entire creation groans with anticipation for the restoration and healing that you promise to bring to our fallen world, we also know that there are many who are lost and many who do not know Your Name. Send us Your Holy Spirit so that we may tell them about You, the one who is, the one who was, and the one who is coming. Amen.

Wednesday, December 12th

Philippians 1:2-11
Ian Thormodson

Devotion

“Filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” Philippians 1:11

Have you ever gotten the gift you wanted most off your Christmas list? What about the top two gifts you wanted? As a kid, I would rarely get one of the top two gifts I had asked for on my list, let alone both. Usually this was because I asked for super expensive gifts that my parents would never get for me. However, as I have gotten older, I have more frequently received my top two wish list gifts. In part, this is because I have a wife that likes to spoil me, but it is also because I ask for realistic gifts which are within the means of the ones buying them for me.

In the text for today, Paul is reminding the Philippian Christians that they have received the top two best gifts ever: the gift of salvation by the gospel of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection and the gift of the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ. We all know the best gift of all time is eternal salvation from sin, death, and the devil by Jesus Christ’s saving acts. But do we know that the second-best gift of all time is the ability to respond to the first gift? The second-best gift is the fruit of righteousness. The same faith which first gives us life in Jesus Christ then gives us the fruit of righteousness and the desire and drive to respond to this first gift, the best gift ever. To respond by being patient with our relatives, listening to our spouses better, caring for the homeless, and simply loving people like Jesus loved people.

Therefore, I challenge you this Advent season to remember not only the greatest gift you have been given, but to also live out the second-best gift of all time. Respond to the best gift ever, the gift of the good news of Jesus Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection, by living out the gift of the fruit of righteousness by loving people like Jesus did.

Prayer

King Jesus, grant that we might live out our lives by bearing the good fruit of righteousness. In Your name we pray, amen.

Thursday, December 13th

Luke 3:1-14
Samuel Fink

Devotion

I wonder if Isaiah had seen what it’d be like for Christians in 2018. He was a prophet after all, God could have revealed 2018 to him. It’s even possible that he was able to envision our annual dilemma, that is, that we embark upon a hopeful and anticipatory Advent season, amid an environment which prefers “Christmas Shoes,” or that Paul McCartney song (I’ve never bothered to figure out if it’s “simply” or “safely” having a “wonderful Christmas time,” though I admit “simply” is more likely), or the new Katy Perry single I heard, which is called “Cozy Little Christmas,” and in which she literally

appropriates the common Christian Christmas refrain that “Jesus is the reason for the season” to say instead that whomever it is she hopes to have a cozy Christmas with is “the reason for the season.”

I wonder if Isaiah had seen all this. And yet I expect that, had he known, he’d not have said anything different. For I trust also, that Jesus Christ, obeying a father who surely knew, would not alter his trajectory in the least. You see, Isaiah spoke a promise, a promise fulfilled in John the Baptist first, and then in Jesus. A promise that God’s desire is to reconcile his beloved creation to himself. Thus he made it absolutely clear that Christ’s salvation was not only for the Jew, and also not only for the gentile, but instead that “all flesh shall see the Glory of God.” And so we know also that, surrounded by confounding and at times frustrating misappropriation of our faith, Jesus came, and then died, and the rose again for these beloved children also.

Prayer

Father, this Advent, make us instruments of your peace. Let us sow the love of Jesus even where it is unexpected and undesired. Let us proclaim salvation in your name to all flesh, adjoining others to the glorious hope we have in you. Amen.

Friday, December 14th

Luke 3:15-20

Will Fredstrom

Devotion

With the season of Advent and the advent of John, comes judgment. Judgment because repentance is proclaimed, the ax is laid to the root, and we are directly, personally encountered with the condemnation of divine wrath. Just as we must let Good Friday have its way with us before we scurry quickly to Easter, we must sit with John’s words today.

John’s baptism is of water, preceded Christ’s baptism by fire. John’s is one of judgment, “He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Yet, John not only proclaims this reality, but embodies it, rebuking the mighty Herod, and calling him to repentance. However, Herod’s judgments against him are void. All human judgments must bend to the mightiest winnowing fork of all.

Thus, with the season of Advent also comes hope. Hope because John knows despite the judgment of Herod, the judgment of God will prevail. Hope because John knows despite the verdict against him, he will be vindicated. Hope because even if he dies, so he will live. Hope because, Jesus will raise him on the last day. Hope, because Jesus has promised the same to you.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, in this season of Advent, may we hear your word which proclaims judgment and hope. May your word of judgment bring forth repentance. May your word of hope, create and sustain faith, and console the brokenness of your creatures. May we joyfully celebrate the nativity of your Son, and pray for the hastening of Jesus’ return in glory. Amen.

Saturday, December 15th

Isaiah 11:1-10
Bradley Wellik

Devotion

The latter end of 1914 was a brutal few months in the history of humanity. During the month of August nation declared war against nation and the world found itself in the midst of a world war. New technologies had turned warfare into the most terrifying it has ever been. Planes, chemical weapons, machine guns were used for the first time in major combat. 1914 began a war that would see the deaths of over 20 million people and wound another 21 million. This carnage and death faced throughout the year of the war is something hard to wrap your brain around.

At the close of the year in 1914 on December 25th, in the midst of this terrifying war, something amazing happened. Enemies who had using these powerful weapons of war on one another left their trenches and came together to celebrate Christmas. The Christmas truce, as it became known, saw two enemies stopping hostilities and fraternizing together. They bartered with one another, sang, played games. The backdrop of the carnage makes this day almost seem far fetched, yet the two sides enjoyed peace only the next day to begin their war again. A day of peace beyond understanding.

In our text we see the same violence. For the last few chapters of Isaiah God has been outlining the coming judgements that are to befall the people of God for their sins. The day of the Lord is coming where the Assyrians will come to punish and exile Israel. Where Babylon in the future will come and wage war against the people of Judah and do the same. People will be ripped from their homes and exiled. Violence upon violence is coming. This violence tears down the tree of Jesse and leaves a stump.

Yet an unexpected peace arises. From the stump of that violence comes a shoot. This coming person has the Spirit of the Lord upon him. Into this violence He comes to raise up the low and to strike the earth with the rod of his mouth. This shoot of the root of Jesse comes to reign. With his reign comes a peace beyond understanding. Enemies come together, prey and hunter, children without fear. The violence and horror come to and end. On the Mountain of the Lord – peace reigns.

This Christmas as we celebrate the coming of this shoot, this child Jesus who comes to reign, we give thanks for the peace of the Lord. For the peace from our sins, and the future peace coming in the new creation. Where there will be no war, no pain, no violence, nothing but the peace of the Lord. It is with expectant joy this Christmas we wait for our king to return and reign in a peace that passes all understanding.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, in a world where violence is so prevalent, we eagerly await the return of Your Son. Send Him quickly, so that we might live in His peace for all eternity. In Jesus' name, amen.

Sunday, December 16th

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Christian Jones

Devotion

There is a lot to fear today: war, rumors of wars, hurricanes, climate change, famine, first calls, being hated by all people, etc... All of which, to varying degrees, justify a little anxiousness; but, frankly, I am not so sure that, even if they were to be combined, they should compare to the fear we should have

when we look back in time to five minutes ago and remember the sin that has sneakily and firmly been planting itself into our lives. Yes, warfare and famine are bad, but sin is what separates and pushes us away from our God. So, what is really more terrifying? (*Definitely sin.*)

The Prophet Zephaniah proclaimed, “The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil.”

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we are preparing to celebrate just that – that the Lord is in our midst. With Him comes the promise that He has come to save us – we never have to fear evil again. We need not fear the evil of war and hatred, nor do we need to fear the absolute terror of our sin, because Jesus, our mighty King, has come and cleared a way for us. Any shame that we have carried, He has turned to praise.

Soon, when Jesus returns to dwell in our midst again, He promises that He will gather us to Himself and we will be in the presence of the Lord, and sin and death will forever only be a thing of the past, and we will surely never need to fear evil again.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, You sent Your Son Jesus into our midst that He would cause our fears to cease. As we await His coming return, strengthen us that we might not fall into the old habits and sins that He has overcome in our lives, but that we trust that when He returns we will never have to fear sin and its deathly consequences again. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

Monday, December 17th

Psalm 85
Sean Berry

Devotion

I want to start here with v. 4-7 of Psalm 85 because I sense this is a cry all too relevant for us this time of year and this time of life. You just finished a long semester, some for the first time since the curriculum change, some for the first time at Seminary. You stayed up late studying, writing papers, kneeling before God and your profs begging for a good grade. Now, you’re broadsided by the festivities of Christmas (wait we’re still in Advent!). You need to revive and restore your strength to visit with family, your significant other’s family, get gifts, travel. Not to mention there is this strange Christmas (or is it Holiday?) angst. “is it okay to tell strangers Merry Christmas” “Who cares about the White House decorations!? I still need to set up my tree!” I don’t blame anyone crying out the words of the Psalmist. So much flanks you on all sides and it’s hard to find peace and restoration.

The Psalmist reminds us, “let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people.” The Psalmist, understanding his strife, also recognizes that the Lord will speak and give what is good. The Lord continues to speak and give to you what is good. While you are confronted with one thing after another the Lord comes into your presence. Next week we will celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, who came to bring about peace and restoration. He meets you in the messiness of the world, no longer looking down from the sky but to restore you. He revives you and renews you so that you can follow in his footsteps that have prepared the way forward. Trust in the peace and restoration he gives you this day.

Prayer

Dear God, let me hear what Your Word has spoken. Grant that I might live in the peace that He brings. In His name, Jesus, amen.

Tuesday, December 18th

Philippians 4:4-7
Nicholas Gonzalez

Devotion

Have you had a chance to sit back and relax yet? The semester just ended a few days ago and I know that usually means there are some of us who are still tying up the loose ends on that last assignment. Perhaps you finally submitted that sermon for Homiletics, or finished your take-home Systematics final. Whatever the case might be, my question remains the same, have you had a chance to sit back and relax? I know that one of the things I look forward to every year at the end of the winter semester is sitting on my couch and listening to Christmas music and just relaxing, even if just for a moment before my niece and nephew attack me to play with them.

Because in that brief moment of relaxation, there is a sense of peace. After the stress of finals week is over and I forget that Christmas is only about a week away, I am able to sit back, take a deep breath, and relax. In the midst of what is such a busy time of year, especially for us as future church workers, it would seem that peace is not easy to find. Thus, it is so fitting that our text for today's devotion comes from Paul's exhortation and encouragement to the people in Philippi.

And in the same way Paul is exhorting and encouraging his people, I wish to encourage and uplift you during this Advent season. We are only one week away from Christmas, when we will celebrate the birth of our Lord and I am sure there are plenty of things to be stressed about. My hope for you this Advent is that in the midst of all of your busyness and anticipation, you turn it all over to God in prayer and supplication. And you receive the peace of God that surpasses all understanding. May it fill your heart and mind, as you await the birth of your Savior, Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Lord God, in the midst of such a busy time of year, let us be filled with joy as we anticipate the birth of your Son, and may we find peace that surpasses our understanding, a peace that comes through you alone. Amen.

Wednesday, December 19th

Luke 7:18-28
Ryan Maser

Devotion

"Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Sometimes what we seek after is not always clear to us. We have expectations in our minds of how something is supposed to look, whether that is a test score, a doctor's appointment, or a new car. When we are given the results, or the news from the doctor, or take that test drive, our expectations and dreams are suddenly pushed aside as reality takes over. Blinded by our own presuppositions and ideals, we realize how far from the truth we really were.

So it is with those who first saw Jesus in his public ministry. They had no idea who this man was, or what he was up to. The miraculous things that he did, the healing of the blind, the cleansing of the lepers, the raising of the dead, were all events and activities that those who sought the Messiah had least expected. The flowery dreams and mystical visions of a dominant King who was to usher in the Kingdom of God came in a lowly carpenter from Nazareth who spent his time among the outcast. He was born in a stable, died an innocent death on the cross, and was buried in a borrowed tomb. Even His resurrection to new life caught His own disciples by surprise.

This Advent, how are you blinded by your own expectations? Are you distracted by the things of life that surround you? Are you enveloped by how you envision Jesus to be in your life, or are you resting in the faith of what Christ came into the world to do for you at the Cross and the promise of his second coming? May God grant you the clarity and vision to see Jesus as who He really is, the Son of God who came into the world to die and rise again for you.

Prayer

We pray: Almighty God, cut through the vain realities and expectations that blind us to the truth of Your Son Jesus. In His name we pray, Amen.

Thursday, December 20th

Luke 7:29-35

Alex Lahue

Devotion

Have you ever encountered someone who's difficult to give gifts to? You ask what they want for Christmas and they say, "I don't know." Or maybe they say, "You don't have to get me anything." But you know that's code for: I want you to get me the perfect gift. Yet, you're left wondering what the perfect gift really is. So, one year you do your best to find a meaningful home decoration at the annual craft fair, but there's not much of a reaction upon the reception of your carefully chosen gift. The next year you attempt to make something yourself to add more meaning to the gift, but you witness the same reaction, experiencing the same uncertainty you've always had with this person. Finally, you give up and resort to giving gift cards.

It's frustrating when someone is a difficult receiver. You just want them to accept your gift with overflowing joy and gratitude. Perhaps you yourself have found it difficult at times to receive. Someone says to you, "Thank you!" You respond, "NO...Thank You!" You brush off a word of affirmation given to you by a parishioner or a friend. You may have had difficulty receiving criticism on that paper, or that sermon you gave, a decision you made, a comment you posted, or a behavior you exhibited.

It can be difficult to receive, especially when it's not exactly what we wanted. The Pharisees were difficult receivers. Jesus compares them to little kids who can't make up their minds. They didn't receive John's message of God's warning to repent, and they didn't receive Jesus' good news of the arrival of God's kingdom. By being difficult receivers, they missed out on God's good gift right in front of them.

God gave you His good gift of a down-to earth Savior. Jesus perfectly received the wrath of God so He could give you the ultimate gift of God's forgiveness. He gives you all of His grace through His Word, His Spirit, His meal, His Church. He desires that you receive His gifts wholeheartedly.

Joyously and thankfully receive all the gifts God gives to you this time of year. By the power of the Holy Spirit you can receive God's word for you. As you prepare to celebrate Christmas, of what does

His word call you to repent? In addition to God's word, what particular gift in your life is He calling you to thank Him for more frequently?

God gave us the gift of a down-to-earth Savior, and we look forward to the gift of His return and our bodily resurrection. So, as we wait, we receive His gifts today with joyful, thankful, and whole hearts.

Prayer

Father, we confess that we are not always the most gracious receivers. Help us to give thanks for the good gift of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

Friday, December 21st

*Micah 5:2-5
Chad Bolosan*

Devotion

When my twins Charlotte and Emma were born, people had trouble telling them apart. We had to create ways so that people could more easily tell who was who – dressing them differently, a bow versus a headband. This was especially so when they were newborn and little, as multiples often are. So very little. No distinguishing marks or features, no especially different personalities, no voices. Just your average-looking, run-of-the-mill infants.

God also has to make some distinctions to his prophet Micah. The coming king is said to come out of Bethlehem Ephrathah of the tribe of Judah. Not to be confused with the Bethlehem that Joshua mentions to be amongst the tribes of Zebulun. The prophecy also has to make a distinction of it's proclaimed king. After all, a king had already been born in this Bethlehem, King David. Was Micah possibly just revealing an older prophetic message that had already come to pass? The distinction is clear here – this king is to be one who will “come forth for me... from of old, from ancient days”. This was going to be no ordinary man, this was the messiah.

But really? Little ol' Bethlehem? “Too little to be among the clans of Judah”-Bethlehem? Wouldn't a town like that also be too little for a savior to be born in? Too little for God to be born in?

Nope.

Nothing is too little for God. Nothing is too insignificant for God. What God wants, God gets. He chooses us based on himself, not based on us.

So even when we're feeling small, or if we aren't feeling special and feeling undifferentiated from anyone else – we are still chosen by God to be His people. We still have that promise of the coming savior, and that is where our hope rests. We still have our faith in the forgiveness from the cross.

Prayer

Gracious God, continue to use us to advance Your Kingdom, to show Your love, and to share Your Good News; and, grant that we might not overlook those opportunities, even if they seem insignificant to us. In Jesus name we pray, amen.

Saturday, December 22nd

Luke 1:39-45
Álvaro Witt Duarte

Devotion

The expectant mothers of this birth narrative knew of the gift they had in them. These faithful women knew of the divine miracles they carried in their womb. The once-barren and elderly Elizabeth expected the greatest born of a woman, the Forerunner, the Baptizer.

The betrothed virgin Mary expected the Son of Most High, the Lamb of God, the Messiah. Elizabeth's exclamation to Mary at that meeting was not only significant at that time, but is also significant for the church today. "Blessed is the fruit."

That Blessed Fruit that taught, healed, and redeemed is that blessed fruit that we receive at the altar. That Blessed Fruit that was in Mary is the Blessed Fruit, that gift, of the Eucharist, which we receive freely and out of love.

As Mary is blessed, we are blessed, even as sinner, to receive His body and blood, which cleanses us and forgives us of our sins.

Prayer

Lord, keep us in Your faith and favor that we may live in You even as You live in us. Amen.

Sunday, December 23rd

Luke 1:46-56
Gregory Moffitt

Devotion

When you hear the words "my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior," you might start humming one of the many versions of the Magnificat which are found in our liturgical services. Throughout the history of Christendom, the Magnificat has been one of the most cherished canticles in Scripture, precisely because it is a wonderful confession of Mary's faith in the coming Messiah. As we prepare for the joyful celebration of our Lord's Nativity, let us meditate upon two things; first, Mary's faithfulness and how this can serve as an example to us, and more importantly upon how Mary's song points to the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

When Mary states that all generations will call her blessed, this is because God had chosen her as an instrument through which Christ would become incarnate, and by His suffering, death and resurrection atone for the sins of the world and be victorious over sin, death and Satan. This blessing which God gives to Mary is completely a result of His grace and is not based upon Mary's merit or worthiness. Mary clearly confesses this when she says that her spirit rejoices in God her savior, and when she praises God for looking upon her humble estate.

In the same way, all of the blessings of salvation which God gives to us are solely on account of the work of Christ and not upon our merit; this provides us Christians a great deal of comfort since the blessings we receive from God are not dependent upon our disposition. As we continue to reflect upon Mary's words, we see that her pronouncement that God fills the hungry with good things is fulfilled in the work of Christ. Jesus feeds His church with His Word and Sacraments, and ultimately, He will feed us at the marriage feast on the last day.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, grant that as we now prepare for the joyful celebration of Christ's birth and eagerly await His return that we, like Mary and all the saints who have gone before us, would be preserved in faith, and hold fast to Jesus' promise that the one who endures to the end will be saved. We ask this in Jesus' Name. Amen.

Monday, December 24th

Isaiah 9:2-7
Adam Rodriguez

Devotion

Darkness and light. This is one of the more familiar metaphors for describing the Kingdom of God and Jesus himself. Jesus is the light of the world, and those who follow him will never have to walk in darkness (Jn. 8:12). We read that every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of the heavenly lights (1 Jn. 1:17). However, it is not just the Bible that uses the concepts of light and dark to teach us things. Hollywood portrays good characters using lighter colors and evil characters using darker colors. White, in many paintings, uses light to symbolize purity, goodness, and life. On the other hand, darker colors usually symbolize death, evil, and the unknown.

Isaiah tells us, "On those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned" (Is. 9:2). Have you felt the deep darkness this Christmas season? If we define darkness as the absence of light, and Jesus is light, then living in the land of deep darkness is living in a land without Jesus. Have you felt the absence of God this Christmas season? Have you seen places where God seems to be absent? Have you witnessed situations that made you scratch your head and say, "Is God really here?" If this is you, or has ever been you, take heart in the Gospel made flesh. The promised Light has come into the World. God has finally followed through on His promise. Someone is reigning on King David's throne forever. The Word has come. The Light has come! Emmanuel, God with us, is here!

Take heart in how the Gospel of John describes our Savior, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). The darkness has not, is not, and never will overcome Jesus. The light is here to stay! Merry Christmas Eve!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for piercing the darkness and shining light upon us through your Son Jesus. Help us to shine Your light to others. In Christ's name, Amen.

Monday, December 24th (Midnight)

Luke 2:1-21
Luke Scheele

Devotion

"In those days..." have you ever had an opportunity to tell someone a story starting with those words? Or how about, "back when..." or "one time..." Regardless of how you started your own story

you've probably found occasion when you've had a strong desire to tell someone about an event that happened to you or a story about someone you know. They all have a beginning. They all have a purpose. They all have a message to tell.

Here in the Gospel of Luke, the evangelist Luke has a message to tell us. Except unlike most of our own stories that revolve around us and maybe impact a few people the story that Luke is trying to relate to us affects all the world. In order to emphasize this he even relates his story to people and events in history that are familiar. Although I personally haven't lived through a decree made by Caesar Augustus, I have lived through many decrees and even experienced periods where I had to "be registered." I can relate to and imagine some of the pain and trouble of what Mary and Joseph went through. What's more I've also had 3 of my 4 kids born during the same time period when we were trying to move to a different state. Let me tell you, it was "not" a stress-free experience, but it makes for a good message.

Here in the Gospel of Luke, the evangelist Luke has a message to tell us. Except unlike most of our own stories, this message is "good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Lk 2:10). This "good news" is a message of victory, a message of salvation, a message of the birth of "Christ the Lord." It is a message worth sharing. This message is that Jesus, true man born of Mary, is your savior. Jesus, who is true man, but also who is Christ the Lord. The Christ, anointed by God through prophecy, sign, and miracle. The Lord, the commander and general of multitudes of heavenly hosts. The Lord whose presence on earth brings God glory. This very same Jesus is your Savior. Not a future promise of a Savior, but a present reality of Salvation in the very real and very present here and now. This is the good news, the message of victory for you.

And the good news or "gospel" is not meant to be kept to yourself. It is meant to be proclaimed to a betrothed virgin who just went through the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem while pregnant. It is meant to be treasured, to be cherished, but also to be proclaimed. The message of good news was for Joseph who was charged with caring for his young family. The message of good news was for all who heard it. The message is for you and for me. The gospel message of Christ birth is for all the world. The message did for them what it does for us now, at the message of a Savior we can return to our own stories "glorifying and praising God for all [we] have heard and seen." (Lk 2:20). Now share this message with your neighbor. Tell them that of Jesus their Savior, Jesus, who is Christ the Lord.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, Your Son is the message of God incarnate to the world and for the world. Help us to live out this reality for our neighbors. We ask this for the sake of Jesus, Amen.



Concordia Seminary

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801 SEMINARY PLACE • ST. LOUIS, MO 63105 • WWW.CSL.EDU • 314-505-7000

