

Week 4 – Advent Messengers – Friday Christmas Day

Luke 2:11 *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior,
who is Christ the Lord.*

THE "ANGELIC" CHRISTMAS GOSPEL

The angel shows most clearly that nothing is to be preached in Christendom except the Gospel, he takes upon himself the office of a preacher of the Gospel. He does not say, "I preach to you," but "glad tidings I bring to you. I am an Evangelist and my word is an evangel, good news." The meaning of the word Gospel is, a good, joyful message, that is preached in the New Testament. Of what does the Gospel testify? Listen! the angel says: "I bring you glad tidings of great joy, my Gospel speaks of great joy. Where is it? Hear again: 'For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.'"

Behold here what the Gospel is, namely, a joyful sermon concerning Christ, our Savior. Whoever preaches him rightly, preaches the Gospel of pure joy. How is it possible for man to hear of greater joy than that Christ has given to him as his own? He does not only say Christ is born, but he makes his birth our own by saying, to you a Savior.

Therefore the Gospel does not only teach the history concerning Christ; but it enables all who believe it to receive it as their own, which is the way the Gospel operates, as has just been set forth. Of what benefit would it be to me if Christ had been born a thousand times, and it would daily be sung into my ears in a most lovely manner, if I were never to hear that he was born for me and was to be my very own? If the voice gives forth this pleasant sound, even if it be in homely phrase, my heart listens with joy for it is a lovely sound which penetrates the soul. If now there were any thing else to be preached, the evangelical angel and the angelic evangelist would certainly have touched upon it.

- Martin Luther



Devotions for the Advent Season
2009

Week 1 - Advent Messages - Sunday

THE ADVENT WREATH

Already before Advent begins the communities where we live begin to get ready for Christmas. We see decorations put up downtown. We hear reminders of how many shopping days are left before Christmas. We hear carols of Christmas played over loud speaker systems at the mall. We see displays of Santa and his reindeer in front yards of homes. Because of this it is easy for us to get ready of Christmas without preparing ourselves for the coming of Jesus. During this pre-Christmas Advent season we want to be sure that we're not just longing for presents piled under the tree but for God's precious gift of a Savior from sin, death, and hell. It is important that we prepare our hearts and homes for the coming of Jesus.

The Advent wreath is one of the best-known customs to help us prepare. Being in the shape of a circle, the wreath stand for eternity. The evergreens symbolize eternal life in Christ. The four candles mark the weeks of the Advent season. At the beginning of the first week one candle is lit. Each time a candle is lit, we think of how dark our lives would be without God and the growing light of salvation through Christ's coming into the world at the first Christmas.

Dear Lord, in high compassion
Bend down with Advent grace.
My heart, I pray, refashion
With mercy from Your face.
Come from the thankless inn
To make my heart Your manger
That I, no more a stranger,
Eternal praise begin.

Week 4 - Advent Messengers - Thursday Christmas Eve

*Luke 2:11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior,
which is Christ the Lord.*

AN ANGEL'S MESSAGE: UNTO YOU

If I have a few minutes in the evening, I often enjoy browsing through the daily newspaper. Every now and then I glance at the public notices. Part of that section includes the birth announcements. The hospitals report who was born and when. A person can find out how big the baby was and who the parents are. But as joyful and momentous as the birth of a child is to a couple, I actually don't find myself spending a lot of time looking at those announcements in the paper. After all, it wasn't my baby that was born.

How different it was the day my wife and I brought our daughter home from the hospital! That day I ran out and bought extra copies of the paper. That day the birth announcements really meant something to me because I could look there and see my own child, and I was thrilled with the gift God had given to us. All of a sudden those few lines of print on page 7D were very special to me -- because the baby was mine.

If the angels had come to the shepherds on Christmas Eve and said simply, "A baby is born in Bethlehem," do you think the shepherds would have left their sheep and gone into town? I think not. What would they have cared? They might have thought about the joy of the new parents for a moment, but if it wasn't their baby, how easily they might have forgotten.

Two little words made all the difference to them that night-- "Unto you." With those words the angels announced to the shepherds not only that a baby had been born, but that this child belonged to them! Now they couldn't wait to see their own flesh and blood, their own relative, their own son!

Those two words make all the difference for you too. Now you can see clearly that God has done this great thing for you. He has given you a Baby. Jesus is your child. He was sent into the world for you and because of you; sent to save you from your sins. "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." Hear the birth announcement -- and go see your new Baby Brother!

Week 4 – Advent Messengers – Wednesday

Luke 3:4-6 *"Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth; And all flesh shall see the salvation of God."*

REPENT!

Still the voice of God's prophet John rings out: REPENT! Through this Word God still prepares people to welcome His Son as Savior and King, to honor Him today with our worship, to serve Him tomorrow in our treatment of others, to lift up our heads in glad anticipation at His return in glory.

You see, God knows none of these things can happen unless we deal with the selfishness and pridefulness, the love of sin and the excuses that go with it -- the strong inclination to value our own opinion even above God's will. All these obstacles to the welcome of Christ into heart and life must be brought low . . . leveled off by that kind of honest and regret-filled sorrow which is the mark of Spirit-worked repentance.

And those deep ravines of despair and doubt? They also are obstacles to Christ's rule in us. To say "God cannot use me"; to say "It's too good to be true"; in despondency to think God's promises don't apply to you -- these valleys of sorrow the Spirit fills by turning our hearts away from doubt and despair to the security and certainty of God's own promises.

Well then, if repentance is God's work, then there is no reason to urge you to repent, right? Don't tell John the Baptist! If only a heart surgeon can help you, you don't sit at home and say, "nothing for me to do". You go to him, talk to him frankly and openly, listen to him, and do what he says. It's no different with spiritual heart problems. Go to the only One who can change your heart. Go to the Lord. Honestly tell Him your sorry condition. Listen to His Word to you, and depend on it. Don't shy away from the truth that convicts, like the pain that precedes healing, it is necessary.

When we see how unfit we are, what poor beggars we are before God; when we see how we have nothing to offer the Lord, the Spirit has done His initial work -- enabling us to see clearly that it is with empty hands we hold fast to Christ our Lord, depending on His living and dying to set us right with God, relying on no one and nothing else.

Week 1 – Advent Messages – Monday

Genesis 3:15 *And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel.*

AN ADVENT MESSAGE TO: ADAM AND EVE

We begin this week's advent meditations at the beginning -- 6,000 years ago in the Garden of Eden where our text records for us the very first promise of a coming Savior. Adam and Eve gave in to the temptation of the serpent and disobeyed the LORD, bringing sin and death upon God's perfect creation.

The key word in this Advent promise is "enmity." Enmity is deep rooted hatred. Enmity is the feeling one has for someone who is an enemy. In this case, God Himself will bring about enmity. The LORD says, "I will put enmity between . . ."

First the LORD says, "I will put enmity between you and the woman." Remember how the serpent had come to Eve under the guise of being her friend? He started by building a relationship with Eve, telling her that eating of the tree would be good for her and she would become like God. This "friendship" between Eve and the serpent would be done away with by God; it would be replaced with enmity between the two.

Next, "I will put enmity . . . between your seed and her Seed." This enmity would continue for quite a while. This enmity, which here started between Satan and Eve, would continue on through succeeding generations. Not only does this refer to the enmity between human beings and Satan but also between believers and unbelievers (John 8:44).

Finally, the LORD would put enmity between the Seed of the woman and Satan Himself. The Seed of the woman would come and would crush the head of Satan, who had led Adam and Eve into sin and brought death into God's perfect world.

Thanks be to Christ Jesus, Savior and Head-Crusher!

Week 1 - Advent Messages - Tuesday

Genesis 12:3 *And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

AN ADVENT MESSAGE TO: ABRAHAM

Today we consider another promise of the coming Savior to another who would be an ancestor of that Savior: Abram.

This is the recorded call of Abram, when the LORD called Abram to leave his home in Ur, trusting that the LORD would provide something even better for him. Notice that the LORD actually makes four promises to Abram, and as we become familiar with the book of Genesis, we realize that the LORD repeats these promises to him throughout his life.

The first promise that the LORD gives to Abram is a land promise: "Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you." As we go on in Genesis, we will hear this promise of land being repeated over and over again from Genesis 12-22.

The second promise is a promise of descendants: "I will make you a great nation." We should note the greatness of this promise, remembering that Abram's wife Sarai was unable to bear children (Genesis 11:30).

The third promise is a blessing promise: "I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you." This is another promise that is repeated to Abraham throughout the coming pages of Genesis, though not as often as the land and descendant promises.

Then, finally we come the promise of the Savior: "And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." This part of the LORD's promise was not just speaking about how great of a person Abram would be, or how many people he would have as descendants, or even the great land that he would possess later on. Here, in the LORD's promise to Abram He is speaking of the blessing of the coming Savior and Head-crusher, Who would be a descendant of Abram, and Who would be the Savior for all people!

Week 4 - Advent Messengers - Tuesday

Luke 3:4-6 *Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth; And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*

"PREPARE MY HEART, LORD JESUS"

When kings of old came to out of the way villages and towns the people welcomed their ruler with more than a ceremony, they didn't just roll out a new carpet, they made a new road . . . a road "fit for a king".

In such terms Isaiah couches his description of John's call to prepare for the king. But the people knew as well as John did that what needed to be filled, straightened, leveled and made smooth was not some roadway into Jerusalem. For the place from which God rules His people, His throne, is not some royal city or earthly palace, but the human heart.

Now, people can and do welcome earthly leaders with grudging hearts, outward honor, and formal loyalty. But with God such a reception is no reception at all, but rather rejection.

True reception of Christ in our Christmas worship and at His Second Coming is through heart reception now -- that is, turning our hearts over to Him. He alone LORD and King, we His faithful subjects.

But there is no human being who is by nature able to do this. Even we in whom God has worked faith in Christ, continually struggle for an undivided allegiance to our Lord. Sin ever afflicts us, fracturing our loyalty and eroding our commitment to the service of our Savior.

God must prepare the human heart if the Savior is to be received and honored in faith and life. This is true if we are talking about the initial change the Spirit works when through the gospel Word He converts the unbelieving sinner turning that person from his sin to his Savior. This is just as true when we who already believe are led by the Spirit through the Word to repent of the sins that too easily beset and entrap us and with sincere sorrow and humble faith turn to our Savior for forgiveness and strength to walk upright and free.

Week 4 – Advent Messengers – Monday

Luke 3:4-6 *The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth; And all flesh shall see the salvation of God."*

THE VOICE OF JOHN

When kings of old came to out of the way villages and towns the people welcomed their ruler with more than a ceremony, they didn't just roll out a new carpet, they made a new road -- a road "fit for a king".

In such terms then Isaiah couches his description of John the Baptist's call to prepare for the king. But the people knew as well as John did that what needed to be filled, straightened, leveled and made smooth was not some roadway into Jerusalem or any other city. For the place from which God rules His people, His throne, is not some royal city or earthly palace, but the human heart.

Now, people can and do welcome earthly leaders with grudging hearts outward honor and formal loyalty. But with God such a reception is no reception at all, but rather rejection. True reception of Christ in our Christmas worship and at His Second Coming is through heart reception now. That is, turning our hearts over to Him. He alone LORD and King, we His faithful subjects.

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Week 1 – Advent Messages – Wednesday

Genesis 49:9-10 *Judah is a lions whelp; From the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion; And as a lion, who shall rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes; And to Him shall be the obedience of the people.*

AN ADVENT MESSAGE TO: JUDAH

The words spoken by Jacob were prophetic words of the LORD, as once again the promised Savior is described. Judah (whose descendants would play a key role in the history of the LORD's people over the next 1500 years) is described as a lion. We often refer to the lion as "the king of the jungle." The lion attacks and devours his prey, and there is none who can challenge him. What a descriptive picture of our Savior, reminding us that His power is sure, and His victory certain! (Consider Revelation 5:5.)

It was Satan whom the Savior came to destroy and gain the victory over. But no matter what Satan tried to do, he could not derail God's deliverance through Jesus. That victory was won by His life, death and resurrection on the third day -- bringing us eternal rest!

The rest that our Savior would bring is also promised in our text. The promise about the Savior continues: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes; And to Him shall be the obedience of the people." This part of the promise gives a different description of the coming Savior. Here the Savior is described as a ruler who would come from the tribe of Judah. The scepter was something that symbolized rule or power. From the time of David until the time of the Babylonian captivity, a descendant of Judah continuously sat on the throne. But this promise looks ahead to a greater king who would rule in a much greater sense.

This Ruler is the same Savior who was promised to Adam and Eve, to Abram, and is now described as the Rest Giver to Judah. Jesus is our long-promised and powerful Savior, the "Lion of the tribe of Judah," and He is Shiloh, the one Who has destroyed the power of Satan, bringing us eternal rest!

Week 1 - Advent Messages - Thursday

1 Chronicles 17:12-14 *He shall build Me a house, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son; and I will not take My mercy away from him, as I took it from him who was before you. And I will establish him in My house and in My kingdom forever; and his throne shall be established forever.*

AN ADVENT MESSAGE TO: DAVID

David wanted to build a house for the LORD, but we are told that the LORD sent Nathan the prophet to David saying, "You shall not build Me a house to dwell in" (1 Chronicles 17:4). Furthermore, Nathan continues, "I tell you that the LORD will build you a house" (1 Chronicles 17:10). The LORD was not going to let David build a house for Him, but instead, the LORD says that He is going to build a house for David!

At first reading, most people think that the person referred to by the LORD in these verses is Solomon, the son of David who built a beautiful temple for the LORD after the death of his father. But the book of Chronicles was not written during the reign of David, nor was it written during the reign of Solomon, but after the kingdom of Judah had been destroyed by the Babylonians. So at the time that this was written, Solomon's glorious temple had been destroyed and there was no longer a son of David and Solomon in authority over the people of Judah. The kingdom of David and Solomon was only a memory now. These verses were recorded by Ezra in order to direct the returning captives to the future fulfillment of this promise in the coming Savior.

Look at the words of the LORD's promise again. One of David's descendants would build the LORD a house and would have a kingdom which would endure forever. This descendant would be the Son of God and He would remain in that house and in God's kingdom forever. It's helpful if we notice that the LORD in these verses is speaking about His kingdom, not David's kingdom.

Jesus was the "Son of David" who also remained the Son of God. Through Jesus, the Son of David, the LORD has established an everlasting house -- the Holy Christian Church -- and He has promised us that His kingdom will have no end.

Week 4 - Advent Messengers - Sunday

GOD'S MESSENGERS CALL US TO REPENTANCE AND FAITH

Advent is a time for preparation and spiritual renewal. The violet paraments you see hanging from pulpit and lectern at church are reminders of this. They are symbols of the sorrow of Christian repentance. They preach a silent sermon on the importance of readying ourselves for the coming of our heavenly Guest at Christmas and for His coming on the Last Day.

What can we do to get ready for Jesus? When you prepare your home for receiving holiday guests what do you usually do? Don't you perform chores like vacuuming and dusting, getting rid of clutter, straightening things up a bit so your guests will find your home tidy and neat? Don't you "roll out the red carpet" to help make your guests feel welcome when they step through the door? That's how Scripture encourages us to get ready for Jesus. We're to give our hearts a house-cleaning by sweeping away the things that would offend our heavenly Guest (e.g. the clutter of bad attitudes, the dirt of sinful habits, the grime of spiritual laziness and lethargy). We can't do the clean-up work on our own, though. We need the Holy Spirit's help. He uses the Word to show us our sin and lead us to drown our old Adam through daily contrition and repentance. By the same Word He draws us to our Savior, comforts us with His forgiving love, and empowers us to begin living a new and nobler life to God's glory.

It's what we sing about in the well-known Christmas carol:

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room
And heaven and nature sing.

Week 3 – Advent Evangelist – Saturday

Isaiah 61:1 *"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, Because the LORD has anointed me To bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives And freedom to prisoners."*

THE SAVIOR'S WORK

Every four years the citizens of this country have the opportunity to elect a new leader for our country. We look at the candidates qualifications and compare those with what needs to be accomplished and make our vote. But still it often happens that someone unqualified gets elected instead. Thanks be to God that our Savior was not elected or chosen by us, but was chosen by God from the foundation of the world.

What was it that our Savior had been chosen to do? He was chosen to bring comfort -- "to bring good news to the afflicted." All people have been afflicted since the time of Adam and Eve and the fall into sin. We are afflicted with sin which is the inability to fulfill God's Law as He wants us to. Our sin condemns us to an eternity in hell with the Devil. But Jesus brought us the "good news" of our sins forgiven through His perfect life and His death in our place.

But our Savior was chosen to do more than just proclaim. More importantly, He was the one who obtained this liberty and comfort for all people. While He was here on earth He was proclaiming this message of liberty but He was also keeping the Commandments of God perfectly in our place. He was looking forward to the cross, when He would also die in our place; for the sins we had committed. Through His perfect life and innocent death He gained the victory over death and the Devil for us. It was the freedom over death and the Devil which He won for us that He came to proclaim. Jesus work was not only to tell us about this freedom from sin, but also to deliver us from the bondage of sin!

Week 1 – Advent Messages – Friday

Isaiah 7:14 *Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.*

AN ADVENT MESSAGE TO: AHAZ

During his reign over Judah, Ahaz was very unfaithful to the LORD, and led the people of Judah away from the worship of the true God. In fact, of all of Judah's kings, Ahaz was by far the most godless. Because of his unfaithfulness, the LORD allowed the King of Israel and the King of Syria to wage war on Judah and Jerusalem. King Ahaz and the people of Judah had seen what these two kings were capable of and were afraid of what they would do to them.

But the LORD sent the prophet Isaiah to King Ahaz to assure him that He would not allow Israel and Syria to terrorize Judah. Instead of being thankful, king Ahaz was arrogant enough to say that he did not want or need the help of the LORD.

The LORD had promised to deliver Judah from the hand of Israel and Syria, and even though Ahaz and the people had rejected that promise, it would remain true. Ahaz had his chance and now, whether he wanted it or not, the LORD would give him a sign. But the sign would not be for proof of their deliverance from Israel and Syria; it would be a sign of a much greater deliverance.

This deliverance would come through one who would be different than any other person who has ever lived. The difference would be that this Savior would be both True Man, and also True God. God had promised Adam and Eve, Abraham, Judah, and even king David that the Savior of the world would come from their descendants. This coming king would be from the line of kings following David, but this King would come to bring spiritual peace to earth through His work on the cross.

This Son of the virgin was Jesus -- Immanuel or "God with us." The LORD was referring not to the Child's actual name, but to what He would be. Jesus would be true man and also true God. In Jesus, God and man were brought together in one person for our deliverance.

Week 1 – Advent Messages – Saturday

Luke 2:10-11 *Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*

AN ADVENT MESSAGE TO: YOU

Have you ever been called something other than your given name? Maybe you have been given a "pet name" by a loved one, or had a nickname that was given to you by your classmates when you were in school. Many people have nicknames they are given that stick with them for the rest of their lives. We are also known by our jobs, dividing us from others who may have the same name but a different occupation. There are many different ways that we can describe one another without using our personal names, and we do that more often than we may realize. These additional descriptions or titles add to our knowledge of who a person is.

In the past week we have been studying Old Testament promises of the coming Savior. These promises were also descriptions of who and what the Savior would be. In many prophecies of the Savior, we may at times have a difficult time understanding who is being spoken of because they don't ever use the name of the Savior we are so familiar with: Jesus. But even though the name "Jesus" is not used in ANY Old Testament promises of the Savior, we can be sure that He is the one who is being spoken of by how He is described.

We have seen Jesus described as the Head-crusher of Satan, the One through whom all people would be blessed, and the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the king Who would be the Son of God, and the Savior who would be true man and true God. Not once have we seen the name of Jesus, yet as we compare these descriptions to the New Testament (where we do find the name of Jesus) we see that these were promises of Jesus who would finally come for us. For you!

Like Adam and Eve, Abram, Judah, David and many others, you too can place your trust and our confidence in the LORD who has brought about your eternal deliverance from the serpent through the work of Jesus, Your Savior!

Week 3 – Advent Evangelist – Friday

Isaiah 40:1-2 *"Comfort, yes, comfort my people!" Says your God. "Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she has received from the lord's hand double for all her sins."*

FRAGILE: HANDLE WITH COMFORT

In school I once read a play by Tennessee Williams called THE GLASS MENAGERIE. As I recall, the play was about an extremely introverted young woman who collect little glass animal figures. Her favorite was a tiny unicorn. In the story with her was also her brother and mother. These two characters had problems of their own. None of the characters, in fact, were very well adjusted. At the end of the play the glass unicorn was somehow broken. I'm no great analyzer of Broadway plays, but the meaning of this play seemed rather obvious. That, when it comes right down to it, people are like fragile, glass figurines, extremely breakable.

The season of Advent and Christmas are a special time to remember we aren't so tough, and to learn, again, to depend upon the LORD for everything. It is a time to remember that we have shelter from the storms of life. With the Word we are led by the Spirit into the sanctuary of the Bethlehem stable. It is cold and cruel out in the world. But there, by His Manger, it is warm and safe. For our God is there, come down from heaven to taste our fears and to dry our tears. We are not so strong, but we are invited to lean upon Him Who has unfailing strength. We are not so wise, but in His Truth we have light to guide us through all the dark confusion. In love He bids each one of us, "Come!" And so we kneel before Him, just as we are -- sinful, breakable, worn and weary. We lay our every burden beside His bed of straw, and then watch as He carries them, everyone, all the way to the cross. Then finally we stand back in total wonder as our sins are laid upon Him, the Sinless One, We are amazed because, in exchange for our sins, we receive the double blessing of pardon for our sins, and life without end.

So hear the words again. Let them wrap around you like a warm blanket against your sorrows and your sins. "Comfort, yes, comfort My people!" Says your God. "Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, That her warfare is ended, That her iniquity is pardoned; For she has received from the Lord's hand Double for all her sins."

Those are God's own words to you ...

Words to keep fragile folks like you and me from breaking.

Week 3 – Advent Evangelist – Thursday

Isaiah 9:2,4 *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined. For You have broken the yoke of his burden and the staff of his shoulder; the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian.*

AS IN THE DAY OF MIDIAN

So certain is Isaiah of the Messiah's coming, that he speaks of it as if it had already occurred, and the victory were already won -- won by God in such a way that those delivered could never conclude that it was their doing -- as was the case when the Lord used Gideon to rout the vastly superior forces of Midian.

And God had seen to it that Israel was greatly outnumbered. He had pared down the 32,000 who had answered Gideon's call until only 300 remained -- the 300 most frightened, least likely of warriors.

Yet, when Gideon and his men broke the jars that hid their torches, blew on their trumpets and cried out: "The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!" the result was a thorough-going rout of the Midianites.

Isaiah uses Gideon's victory to picture a far greater one -- the victory of God's greatest champion over Satan and his demon forces. For Gideon's victory was great, but it was nothing compared to Christ's. Gideon's victory over Midian was great and bloody, but not final. Jesus' victory over Satan was bloody (the Victor's blood!) -- and eternally final.

And because Christ came to win His greater victory for us -- with His own blood -- a far greater joy than that of victorious Gideon is ours.

But as with Gideon vs. Midian our God wins the day in a way most surprising and unexpected way. He sends an army of One! And that One who comes as a child, comes to die a seemingly helpless death.

Yet from the dark shadow of the grave itself, the Light has shined!

Week 2 – Advent Figures – Sunday

1 Thessalonians 5:16 *Rejoice always.*

AN APOSTLE'S JOY

Notice the Apostle Paul does not say, "Be happy all the time." Rather "Rejoice" -- that is, "Rejoice in the LORD." It's not unlike when the Psalm-writer says: "Come, let us make a joyful noise unto the Lord." It's an invitation to worship, to come before God in awe and humility, but also in celebration, joyfully rehearsing what God has done for us and given to us in Christ.

Like the gift of God's love in Christ. This gift which comes wrapped up in our Savior is meant to be used. That's why it's expressed as a command. The joy we have in Christ is ours as believers, it's the joy of which the angels sang at the Savior's birth. It's the deep and abiding joy of the forgiveness of sin and peace with God. We sing the angels' song every Sunday "Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace . . ."

And this joy is ours every day. A joy deep and abiding. This joy does not depend on the fleeting circumstances of life, on our successes or triumphs. This joy rests on God's wisdom and love, His power and grace in Christ.

Life's storms don't change the joyful reality that in Christ we are safe and secure. And our future is one of eternal joy and delight in the company of the Son of God who loved us and gave Himself for us.

Week 2 – Advent Figures – Monday

Genesis 35:16-20 *Then they journeyed from Bethel. And when there was but a little distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel labored in childbirth, and she had hard labor. Now it came to pass, when she was in hard labor, that the midwife said to her, "Do not fear; you will have this son also." And so it was, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-Oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). And Jacob set a pillar on her grave, which is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day.*

RACHEL GOES TO BETHLEHEM

We live today in what is called "a mobile society." People drive hours every day just to go to work. When we take vacations we can drive or even fly to a different state or country. Perhaps some of you have made plans to travel during the Christmas season.

Let's do some traveling. Let's go to Bethlehem in spirit with a few people who are connected to the city of the Savior's Birth.

Traveling in those days was difficult enough, but when Rachel traveled from Bethel toward Bethlehem with her husband, Jacob, she was pregnant with her second child. We don't even like to think of having a child in the car or outside the hospital; but they were traveling on foot outside of Bethlehem when Rachel went into labor.

Bethlehem was to become a place of pain and sorrow for both Rachel and Jacob. For the place where she gave birth was also the place where she died.

We celebrate Bethlehem as a place of hope and joy because it was there that the Savior was born. But, the region around Bethlehem was not always a place of joy nor was every birth there a joyful one. As Rachel died, she suggested that her son be named Ben-Oni, which means a son of trouble.

We are by birth and nature sons of trouble. We are natural born enemies of God. We bring trouble upon ourselves and others by choosing our own paths and our own ways. Our sins have brought upon us a guilty verdict and eternal death and these are no minor troubles.

Jacob didn't name his son Ben-Oni. He named him Benjamin which means "a son of my right hand." God might have considered us sons of trouble, but instead, He sent His Son into the human race at Bethlehem to make it possible for us to be called children of God.

Week 3 – Advent Evangelist – Wednesday

Isaiah 40:5b *For the mouth of the LORD has spoken it.*

IT MATTERS WHO SAYS IT

A student came into the classroom one morning and declared to the teacher, "There will be no school tomorrow!"

"Who says so?" the teacher asked.

"I just called it that way," he answered.

"Well, if you're the one who says it, it doesn't count," chimed in another.

A week later the principal walked into the room and said, "There will be no school tomorrow because of emergency maintenance on one of the buildings." Then all the children clapped and cheered. A student's word didn't carry much authority, but when the head of the school announced that classes were canceled, everyone knew it was really so. Sometimes it matters who says it.

A Savior is coming. It is Jesus, the Christ. He shares in your humanity. He feels your temptations, your hurt, and your pain. He takes away your sorrow by offering His very life on Calvary's cross, forgiving your sins, and opening heaven's gates. He promises to be with you even to the end of the world. He invites you to pray to Him; to lean on Him for every needed blessing.

Who says so? The LORD says. So you can be sure that it is really true.

Week 3 – Advent Evangelist – Tuesday

Isaiah 40:5a *And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it.*

GLORY

The sun was just beginning its escape on the far horizon. A few lazy gulls were circling near the shoreline. The streaks of red, orange, and purple crept across the sky providing a breathtaking sunset. What a glorious sight it was! You too have seen things in the natural world, I am sure, that simply make you stop and say, "That's the glory of God!" It's true that God shows us His glory often in nature for He is present there with His divine hand-- showing us just how majestic, wonderful, and awesome He really is.

Yet the greatest revelation of God's glory isn't found in the sky or in the sea or in looking at fabulous mountains and canyons. It is found in a humble cattle stall. In a trough where animals lately fed. Look on the face of Jesus Christ. Isn't this birth which we await so eagerly the most glorious sight? Isn't this what Isaiah saw when He said, "And the glory of the LORD will be revealed"? Isn't it at Bethlehem where we really see how majestic, wonderful, and awesome our God is? Here He sends His only begotten Son into the world to suffer and die-- to bear such a load of sin and guilt-- just so that we, undeserving as we are, can shine in glorious day!

To my mind, Christ Himself is the glory of God. For He shows us the Father's heart and is surely the greatest thing ever revealed to the eye of man.

Week 2 – Advent Figures – Tuesday

Ruth 4:13, 17 *Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; and when he went in to her, the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son . . . And they called his name Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.*

RUTH GOES TO BETHLEHEM

She wasn't born and raised in Bethlehem, but she came to call it home. Ruth was a gentile from Moab. She came to be married to one of Naomi's sons when they moved to Moab to escape a famine. Even though she was encouraged to stay in her homeland and remarry, Ruth showed herself a woman of integrity and love. She determined to stay and support her mother-in-law.

When Ruth came to Bethlehem, she was a stranger in a strange land. If we visited Bethlehem today, we would probably feel like she did when she arrived. She didn't fit in. She was different.

God blessed Ruth with faith to trust in Him and His promises of a Savior -- and with a god-fearing husband, Boaz. God also blessed her with a son, Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David.

This may seem, at first glance, little more than an ordinary event in a mildly interesting history. But this is more than that. This is the ongoing story of God keeping his promise of a Savior. Notice that the Savior's family tree includes a gentile, a non-Jew like us.

Do you ever feel like you don't belong? I mean, when you hear the promises that God made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Judah, do you think, "Well, I'm not of this ethnic background, how do these promises, made to the Jews, apply to me? I'm not Jewish!"

While some of the Jews of Jesus' day thought that the Christ would come only for them, the truth had been revealed centuries before. The account of Ruth, a gentile, reminds us of this fact.

Many of us are German or Norwegian or Scottish or English. Still the promises that God made to and through His Old Testament people concerned us all. The announcement of the Savior's birth was not meant just for a few, but for us all. We are children of God through faith in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26) with all rights and privileges. Didn't God's messenger say so? "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11).

Week 2 – Advent Figures – Wednesday

1 Samuel 16:10-12 *Thus Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen these." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all the young men here?" Then he said, "There remains yet the youngest, and there he is, keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him. For we will not sit down till he comes here." So he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, with bright eyes, and good-looking. And the Lord said, "Arise, anoint him; for this is the one!"*

DAVID GOES TO BETHLEHEM

I've seen the signs outside more than one city, so it does happen. A person born and raised in a town leaves and becomes famous. If they become famous enough, the city eventually puts up a sign at the edge of town: "Home of . . ."

David grew up in Bethlehem. He walked the same roads Jacob and Rachel traveled. He likely watched his father's sheep in some of the same fields where Ruth gleaned Boaz' grain.

If we could go back and walk the streets of Bethlehem with David, we would be traveling with a celebrity. David wasn't just given the keys to the city, the city itself came to bear his name. If signs had been posted on the outskirts, they would have read: Bethlehem, the City of David.

Bethlehem was known for its agriculture, for its flocks and herds. It was not a place you would think to look for the next King of Israel. Yet, God sent Samuel to Bethlehem, to the home of Jesse, because He had chosen one of his sons to be king over his people. Humanly speaking, David was an unlikely choice to be king. But David was God's choice -- and God made him a great king.

God has also chosen us. We are called by the Holy Spirit to be His children by faith. And as God's children, we are also chosen to be His witnesses to the world.

Do we think of ourselves as unlikely or unfit choices? God has chosen us of his grace, not because of what we "bring to the table." He will also equip us for our task by His Word. He will make of us fit witnesses, even as He made David, a shepherd boy, into Israel's greatest king.

Bethlehem was once called "the city of David," but one far greater than David was born there. We rejoice to call Him our King. God grant that the sign at the entrance of our hearts always reads: "Home of Christ the King!"

Week 3 – Advent Evangelist – Monday

Isaiah 40:1-2 *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.*

HELP IS ON THE WAY

We live just a few blocks from the local volunteer fire station. Several times a week the lights flash and the sirens wail by our windows as the emergency vehicles head out on a call. Lately, when they pass by I will stop for a moment and say a prayer that the rescue will arrive in time to do good for the victim. When a person is in trouble, it's nice to know that help is on the way.

But sometimes I feel like I am the one who needs to call the rescue squad. My problems aren't always of a medical variety, but I wouldn't mind seeing some lights and hearing some sirens to make me feel like there is hope for rescue in my life. I get myself into plenty of bad situations because of my sin, and I need help. Does it ever happen that way to you? Things you say or do-- or don't do-- snowball into problems that are seemingly out of control. We get ourselves into messes with our families, our friends, our co-workers, and our God. During those times of despair and frustration, wouldn't it be nice to know that help is on the way?

Advent tells us that very thing. It tells us that Jesus Christ is on the way. He might not come with lights and siren, or maybe He does-- there was the angel chorus on Christmas Eve, after all. Christ comes to help; to fix the mess of your sin; to pardon your iniquity; to suffer, die, and pay for it; and to apply His healing mercy wherever and whenever it is needed.

Week 3 – Advent Evangelist – Sunday

John 1:4-5 *In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness.*

THE LIGHT GOES OUT TO THE WORLD

Have you ever stopped to consider the fact that Christmas occurs three days after the darkest day of the year? It is sometimes difficult to be excited about winter. Cold, dark, wet, and often dangerous roads, these things all combine to make winter, for some people, the worst time of the year. We can get grumpy about shoveling our sidewalks. We can complain about looking out the window at 3:30 and seeing nothing but black. And yet right in the midst of this dreary, dull, depressing time of year sits Christmas. Arguably it is the most cheerful, joyous time of year. It is hard to truly dislike winter with such a warm and festive holiday sitting at its heart.

The festival of Christmas spreads out tendrils of warm glowing joy to what would otherwise be an almost unendurably bleak and forbidding stretch of time. This is very appropriate, since it is the celebration of the coming of warmth and joy into the bleak desolate world of men. Like a furnace in the heart of a house, so is Christmas in the heart of winter, and so is Christ in the heart of a man.

Just when our life looks the bleakest. Just when we don't think it could get any darker out, Christ comes with His light to change mourning into gladness. We may yet have months of gloom ahead, we may have dark hours and cold nights still coming, but once Christmas is in our heart the days only get longer and closer to the Summer of eternity. May all those who live in the shadow of our own darkness continually receive the warmth and light of the celestial rays of that eternal day.

Christ brings the light.

Week 2 – Advent Figures – Thursday

Numbers 24:17 *A Star shall come out of Jacob.*

THE CHRISTMAS STAR

Do you ever take time to look at the stars? Can you pick out any of the constellations as you gaze up at God's heavenly wonder? Did you know that some stars are nearly as big as our entire solar system? Did you know that the nearest star, Alpha Centauri, is over four light years from earth? (That means if you could travel in a space ship at an average speed of 186,000 miles per second it would take you more than four years to reach this nearest star!)

In the Bible we hear of that miracle star which led the Magi hundreds of miles right to the house where baby Jesus was living shortly after his birth. But that star of wonder was nothing compared to the Star the Magi knelt before in Bethlehem. The book of Numbers refers to Jesus Himself as a Star -- the Star that shall come out of Jacob. Jesus is the Star that outshines them all, whether we are talking about those in the sky, or those of the human variety.

He's the one Star every human soul needs to pick out and be able to clearly identify. For Jesus is the only Star that can give light to our sin-darkened hearts. The Star out of Jacob beams with the power of unlimited, unconditional, and unending love for all. He shines with the truth of blood-bought redemption for every man, woman, and child. He glows with the promise of life beyond the grave, life forever in heaven. He radiates with kindness and help for our every need. All other so-called stars (Mohammed, Buddha, etc.) lead only to death and never ending night.

As we prepare for the joyous celebration of our Savior's birth, look up! Look up at the Star of your life. May the light of His redeeming love shine in your heart, and then out into the world!

Week 2 – Advent Figures – Friday

Luke 1:18-20 *And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years." And the angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. "But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time."*

GET READY WITH ZACHARIAS (Part 1)

The priest, Zacharias, and his wife, Elizabeth, had been specially chosen by God to play an important role as the Savior Jesus was about to come into this world, born of His mother, Mary. They too were to have a child. Their child would not be the Savior, but he would be the designated forerunner for the Savior, who had been prophesied in the Old Testament Scriptures. Their son would be John the Baptist and his preaching and ministry would prepare the way for the preaching and ministry of Jesus Himself.

Indeed, a high honor had been bestowed upon Zacharias and Elizabeth as they were chosen to be the parents of John the Baptist. However, they would not be your typical parents. They were very old; in fact, much too old to bear a son, according to natural human capabilities. Even Zacharias himself questioned if such a thing could actually be. Unfortunately, this question stemmed from a lack of trust in the Word of God that came to him through the angel. Because of this, God brought a submission of humility upon Zacharias. He would not be able to use his tongue for speech -- the tongue with which he questioned God -- until the time that John would be born.

Sometimes God brings things into the lives of His people to humble them before Him, especially when for a time they forget to humbly submit themselves to Him and His Word. He does not do this to hurt us, rather He does this because He loves us. He does this to bring us closer to him. He does this to prepare our hearts through humble submission -- as He comes to us to dwell with us.

Week 2 – Advent Figures – Saturday

Luke 1:59-64 *So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias. His mother answered and said, "No; he shall be called John." But they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by this name." So they made signs to his father -- what he would have him called. And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, "His name is John." So they all marveled. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God.*

GET READY WITH ZACHARIAS (Part 2)

We have heard how initially Zacharias doubted the Word of God in that he found it hard to believe that he and his wife, Elizabeth, could actually have a child in their old age. We have heard how, because Zacharias did not fully and humbly submit his own doubts to the sureness of God's promises, that God placed upon Zacharias a type of humbled submission, taking away his ability to speak.

Well, as we can see, throughout the course of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Zacharias was moved to humbly submit himself to God and His will. So much so, that He and Elizabeth were not afraid to make clear to those who questioned them about their son's name. It was to be John. The relatives and neighbors thought that was an odd choice, if not a bad one. After all, Zacharias had gone childless into his old age, and now was his chance to name the boy after himself.

That may have seemed like a good plan according to the ways of this world, but that was not God's plan. God said that the child would be named John, and after his initial doubts, Zacharias humbly submitted himself to God and His plan -- right down to the detail of the child's name. And God's plan for this child was more than just a name. God's plan for Zacharias, Elizabeth and John was intimately connected with the plan for the coming of His own Son into this world. Through the humble submission of faith, Zacharias and Elizabeth were being prepared to see the coming of the Christ into this world.