

Clergy of the ELDoNA, affiliated congregations and missions, and sister churches

Rt. Rev. James Heiser

Salem Lutheran Church, Malone, TX
(Vacancy) Faith L. C., Beaverton, OR

Rev. Jeffrey Ahonen

Good Shepherd L.C., Tony, WI; Alpha & Omega Lutheran Mission, Winter, WI; Apologia Lutheran Mission, Deer Park, WI; Peace L.C., Ironwood, MI

Rev. Ernest Bernet

Discipleship L. C., Mineral Wells, TX

Rev. David Carver

St. Paul L. C., Taylorsville, NC

Rev. Jerald Dulas

Sts. Peter & Paul L. C., Simpsonville, SC; All Saints Lutheran Mission, Myrtle Beach, SC; St. Michael & All Angels Lutheran Mission, Martinez, GA

Rev. Douglas Handrich

Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Peoria, IL

Rev. Kent Heimbigner

Charity Lutheran Church, Burleson, TX

Rev. Michael Henson

Trinity Lutheran Church, Herrin, IL; Port Charlotte Lutheran Mission, Port Charlotte, FL; Memphis Lutheran Mission, Lakeland, TN

Rev. Daniel Mensing

Good Shepherd L. C., Tucson, AZ

Rev. Randy Moll

Good Shepherd L.C., Rogers, AR

Rev. Mark Mueller

Redeemer L. C., Cambridge, MN

Rev. John Rutowicz

St. Boniface Lutheran Church, Niles, MI

Rev. Paul Rydecki

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Las Cruces, NM; Sts. Peter & Paul Lutheran Mission, Silver City, NM

Rev. Josiah Scheck

Christ Lutheran Church, Richmond, MO

Rev. Eric Stefanski

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Harrison, AR; Emmanuel Lutheran Mission, Conway, AR; Lamb of God Lutheran Mission, Rogers, AR

Rev. Joshua Sullivan

Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Kerrville, TX; Faith Lutheran Mission, Leander, TX

Rev. Timothy Tolar

St. Luke Lutheran Church, Kenai, AK
Homer Lutheran Mission, Homer, AK

Rev. Brandon Warr

St. Patrick Lutheran Church, Chipley, FL

Rev. Dcn. Gary Harroun

Trinity Lutheran Church, Herrin, IL

Rev. Dcn. Martin Jackson

Good Shepherd L. C. Rogers, AR

Rev. Dcn. Anthony Oncken

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Rev. Dcn. Floyd Smithey

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International Fellowship:

Rev. Fillmore Alvarez

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Navotas City, Philippines

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Iglesia Confesional de Colombia
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THE LUTHERAN HERALD



NOVEMBER 30, 2020—JANUARY 2, 2021
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NORTH AMERICA

The Calendar

November 29	Advent 1	TLH 95
November 30 (M)	St. Andrew, Apostle	TLH 270
December 6	Advent 2/St. Nicholas	TLH 611
December 7 (M)	St. Ambrose, Bishop, Confessor, and Doctor	
December 13	Advent 3/St. Lucy, Martyr	ELH 167
December 16	Wednesday of Ember Week in Advent	
December 18	Friday of Ember Week in Advent	
December 19	Saturday of Ember Week in Advent	
December 20	Advent 4	TLH 58
December 21 (M)	St. Thomas, Apostle	
December 23 (W)	St. Thorlak, Bishop & Confessor	
December 25 (F)	The Feast of the Nativity of our Lord	
December 26 (Sa)	Festival of St. Stephen, Martyr	
December 27	Sunday after Christmas/ Festival of St. John, Apostle	TLH 112/271
December 28 (M)	Festival of Holy Innocents	TLH 273
January 1 (F)	Festival of the Circumcision	TLH 116

(All pastors and deacons of the diocese are scheduled to be furnished with the Diocesan Calendar and Office Hymns for 2021 by the Festival of the Circumcision. If you would like a complete list, see your pastor, or contact the diocesan office via email at info@eldona.org)

Installation Scheduled for Faith-Beaverton

The installation of Rev. Daniel Mensing as Pastor of Faith Lutheran Church in Beaverton, Oregon is scheduled to take place during the Divine Service on December 13 (Advent 3). We give thanks to the Lord for His care for His saints!

Seminary Schedule

The Winter quarter begins on Tuesday, December 1. During the Winter quarter, four classes will be offered: Greek, Hermeneutics, Lutheran Confessions 1, and Liturgics Practicum 1. Classes are taught Tuesday through Friday morning, with Matins each morning.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 2: EPHESIANS 1:3-6

CHRISTMASTIDE

One of the first evil things Satan did was to engage Eve in debate about the forbidden fruit. Eve should have faithfully replied, “Depart from me; the Lord said ‘Do not eat it.’ His will be done!” Debates about predestination can be just as dangerous, as many false teachers have shown through history. Novices try to argue about the issue like armchair sports fans try to judge the calls of professional referees.

We do well to speak in the clear terms of Scripture. Our eternal God has chosen us to be His children through faith in Jesus Christ. If we hear the Word preached we ought to repent of our sins and believe in the Gospel of forgiveness through Christ’s death. Whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life. Debates beyond the clear Words of Scripture should be banished from the minds of the godly, because Satan would gladly use such discussions to tempt us to evil (see Formula of Concord, Epitome, XI.12).

It is also clear in Paul’s epistle that God wants us to be holy and without blame before Him in love, serving according to His will. If we try to teach and debate when we are not called to do so, we are in danger of vanity. If we stir up idle disputes, then we are in danger of making things unclear. But if we are called to give careful answer and clear testimony according to the simplicity of Christ’s love, then we are showing the spiritual blessings that are ours from heaven.

Prayer: Almighty and everlasting God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the name of Thy beloved Son we may be made to abound in good works; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

Our Lord Jesus was made man according to the will of the Father. He was also subject to the Law and its observances in obedience to the Father's will. God declared that He was well pleased with Jesus, which affirmed that the Son had done everything perfectly according to the divine will. No man had ever accomplished that.

In all that Jesus did, from His birth to His death and resurrection, we see both the teaching of God's holy Law and the perfection of faith. While God's people do not practice the ceremonial observance of circumcision anymore, we do have the Sacrament of Baptism. Faithful parents of the Old Testament Church would make their young children members of God's people by circumcision, but now we have the command and promise that our membership in the Body of Christ is established with water and the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!

The Law serves its purpose by pointing us toward Christ as our righteousness. When the Law accuses and terrifies us, we find forgiveness and peace in our crucified Savior. When we need to know what works of love look like, faith makes us to see how our Lord accomplishes those works through us according to His commands. In all things we are to cling to the name of our Lord Jesus and His perfect fulfillment of the Law of righteousness. And in Baptism we have put on His righteousness.

Prayer: O Lord God, who for our sakes hast made Thy blessed Son, our Savior, subject to the Law and caused Him to endure the circumcision of the flesh, grant us the true circumcision of the Spirit that our hearts may be pure from all sinful desires and lusts; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST,

Happy New (Church) Year! As we begin the penitential weeks of Advent, the Collect for the end of the Church Year sets the tone for the beginning of the new year:

We thank Thee, Lord God, Heavenly Father, that in the past church year Thou hast preserved Thy Word among us in purity, and by it sensibly quickened our souls; and we beseech Thee, Thou wouldst graciously forgive us all our neglect, unbelief, and disobedience of Thy Word, and continue unto us this precious treasure with Thy blessing forevermore; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth, etc.

The beginning of a new year also allows for a return to that which has been neglected. As pastors and laity, we should strive to be diligent in coming together for the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Holy Sacraments. Certainly, the events of the secular world in the past year have driven home how crucial the means of grace are for the Christian life, and how uncompromising we must be in receiving these divinely-bestowed means.

We also strive together to make use of the other festivals and appointed days of the Church Year as opportunities to receive the means of grace; Church is never, in any sense, a Sunday-only part of life. The observance of the festival days (and other such days as are observed in various congregations, e.g., a regular pattern of Matins or Vespers on Wednesdays or Fridays) simply helps to discipline the flesh and create a structured pattern of hearing the Word.

Toward this end, there is recognition of the existence of the Ember Days (which occur on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays following the Feast of St. Lucy [Dec. 13], following Invocavit Sunday, the Feast of Pentecost, and September 14/'Holy Cross'). They entered universal use in the Western Church in the eleventh century and were retained during the Lutheran Reformation, but generally fell out of use in North America.

A helpful introduction to the Lutheran observance of such days is offered by two of the authors of the Formula of Concord, Martin Chemnitz and Jacob Andreae. In their *Church Order for Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel* (1569), Chemnitz and Andreae gave the following instruction for all churches in their respective dioceses: "... henceforth all parsons and preachers in the cities shall at each ember week, instead of

preaching, take up the Catechism for fourteen consecutive days, and so apportion it that all of it may be presented to the people and explained thoroughly and to their benefit. ... And during said ember weeks, the parsons in the villages shall likewise be diligent, insofar as time and place permit, very carefully to explain and impress upon the people the Catechism, which is a norm of all preaching.” (p. 98)

Setting aside *fourteen days* for additional teaching *each quarter* regarding the Small Catechism does not seem practical. However, the following might be a helpful outline for personal study or study at church during the quarterly ember days:

- Advent:** Wednesday: 1st-3rd Commandments
Friday: 4th-10th Commandments
Saturday: Conclusion
- Lent:** Wednesday: 1st Article of the Creed
Friday: 2nd Article of the Creed
Saturday: 3rd Article of the Creed
- Pentecost:** Wednesday: Lord’s Prayer (through 4th Petition)
Friday: Lord’s Prayer (5th Petition through “Amen”)
Saturday: Baptism
- Holy Cross:** Wednesday: Confession
Friday: The Lord’s Supper
Saturday: Morning & Evening Prayer, Table Prayer,
Table of Duties

Of course, other divisions of the Catechism could easily be used.

For Matins, a recitation of the portion of the Catechism may be used in place of a sermon (in *TLH*, the rubrics state that a sermon at Matins is optional); for Vespers, a sermon could be preached concerning the relevant portion of the Catechism. (A draft of the Propers for the ember days is available.) The observance of such ember days is entirely a matter of *adiaphora*; if it is found profitable, then it may be observed. In providing such resources, it is our hope to encourage further devotion to hearing the Word in the coming year.

A blessed Advent to all of you!

Yours in Christ, Bp. Heiser

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 31: HEBREWS 1:1-12 CHRISTMASTIDE

False teachers still say Jesus was just a “messenger”, that He was just a teacher who was no higher than other messengers of holy words. Even Satan was “just a messenger.” He started as a messenger of God, but he fell to become a messenger of his own lies in rebellion against God. But Jesus is higher than all the messengers. He is higher than the men (and women) that He favored to bear His truth into the world; He is higher than the spiritual messengers we know as angels; and He is certainly higher than the fallen angels who bring corrupted messages to kill men and attack God’s kingdom.

Jesus, the Christ, is the very Word of God and true person of the Godhead. He is the true message that was proclaimed by the faithful men and angels throughout the ages. Any religion that denies His divinity or minimizes His supremacy is a religion of dishonesty. The Jewish religion rejects that Jesus is the Anointed Savior. They also reject the Trinity, saying the plural references to God in the Old Testament are speaking of the angels with Him. Corrupted Christian bodies also diminish the authority of Jesus, making the words and reputations of created beings equal to or greater than He who rules from the throne of God, the incarnate Word by whom all things were made.

The true Church continues to confess that Jesus is the Christ, whom all the holy angels, archangels, all the company of heaven, and those in the communion of saints on earth worship as our God and Savior!

Prayer: Almighty and everlasting God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the name of Thy beloved Son we may be made to abound in good works; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

The song of Simeon, the *Nunc Dimittis* of our Divine Service, is one of our most beautiful expressions of the true catholic faith. It summarizes the transition from the Old Testament Church to the New Testament Church. The glory of Israel was the promise of God's Word that the Son of a woman would crush the Serpent and save man. Faithful people like Simeon maintained this hope and trust in God, even long after the rise and fall of Israel's earthly glory.

Those people who were blessed in the true faith of Israel were the ones who recognized that Jesus was the Christ, the fulfillment of God's promise, and they would in turn show forth the glory of God as they revealed this fulfillment to all nations! Luke's account makes it very clear that Simeon cannot boast in his own knowledge, or his heritage, but this understanding and this song were the work of God's Holy Spirit in him.

Our Lord Jesus was lifted up in the temple, and He was later lifted up on the cross. In the New Testament Church our glory is the proclamation of Christ crucified in His Gospel and Sacraments. In His sacrifice on the cross the promise is made into a remembrance. Now we look back to see the holy glory of our forgiveness and everlasting life through His blood and His death, which will be the song of the Church until He comes again in glory!

Prayer: Almighty and everlasting God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the name of Thy beloved Son we may be made to abound in good works; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord First Sunday in Advent

Article VI.

Also they [the Lutheran theologians] teach, that this Faith is bound to bring forth Good Fruits, and that it is necessary to do good works commanded by God, because of God's will, but not that we should rely on those works to merit justification before God. For remission of sins and justification are apprehended by faith, as also the voice of Christ attests: "When ye shall have done all these things, say: We are unprofitable servants" [Luke 17:10]. The same is also taught by the Fathers. For Ambrose says: "It is ordained of God that he who believes in Christ, is saved; freely receiving remission of sins, without works, by faith alone."

—The Augsburg Confession

Part III, Article IV. Of the Gospel

We will now return to the Gospel, which not merely in one way gives us counsel and aid against sin; for God is superabundantly rich in His grace. First, through the spoken Word by which the forgiveness of sins is preached in the whole world; which is the peculiar office of the Gospel. Secondly, through baptism. Thirdly, through the holy sacrament of the altar. Fourthly, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren, Matt. 18:20: "Where two or three are gathered together," etc.

—The Smalcald Articles

The selections from the Book of Concord are from H. E. Jacobs' translation of the Book of Concord, and are taken from the table in volume two of suggested lessons for Sundays and Festivals of the Church.

When these words of hope come to Jeremiah, the prophet is in prison in Jerusalem and the city is under siege by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar. Verse 4 says that the people of Jerusalem were pulling down their houses for materials “to fortify against the siege mounds and the sword.” The kingdom of Judah is about to fall and her people to be slaughtered or carried into exile. In the middle of the terror, God declares, “In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell safely,” for, “I will cause to grow up to David a Branch of righteousness; He shall execute judgment and righteousness in the earth.”

That Branch is the Lord Jesus Christ. He satisfied judgment by taking the world’s sin on Himself, and He brought righteousness by justifying those who believe in Him. He saved Judah not as an earthly nation, but as a holy Church, dedicated and reconciled to God.

Like Jeremiah, the Christian Church today preaches the hope of the Gospel of Christ in the midst of terror and distress. The devil besieges the Truth, the world slaughters the saints, and sin drags away many into despair and unbelief, but the righteousness of Christ covers the Church and makes her His own. Neither the devil, nor the world, nor sin can prevent the Advent of our Lord when He comes again in glory for the fulfillment of our salvation.

Prayer: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

The commands of our Lord are good and beneficial. In our efforts to make clear that we are not saved by the Law, sometimes we give the impression that the Law of God is evil or worthless. It is certainly not! Our abuse of His commands are evil and worthless, but not the wisdom of His Law itself.

Our Lord’s commands, whether they were ceremonial, moral, or sacramental, have been given so that His Holy Spirit can manifest His work and power in us. By faith Joseph and Mary did what the Lord had taught them in His Law, to show they had true fear, love, and trust in Him to accomplish what He promised in their new Son! They didn’t just sit at home and think pious thoughts about God’s Words; they believed and they obeyed.

When done in faith by the power of God’s Holy Spirit, deeds and obedience can teach the message of Christ’s mercy. So many people do not hear about God’s grace in Jesus Christ and His Church because we fail to do the simple works of our Christian vocation. The world does not stop doing its works to teach selfishness and deceit, and in the darkness of its sin, even a small work in Christian love can be a light to help others. The time of waiting during Mary’s purification, the journey to Jerusalem, and the small sacrifice of two birds may seem like unimpressive gestures, but according to faith in the Lord these gestures are monumental acts that serve the confession of Jesus Christ to this day!

Prayer: Almighty and everlasting God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the name of Thy beloved Son we may be made to abound in good works; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

MONDAY, DEC. 28: MAT. 2:13-18 FEST. OF THE HOLY INNOCENTS

We call the young martyrs of this incident “innocents” because they were not guilty of the thing for which they were murdered. We need to be careful and clear about this so we do not give the impression that we ignore the reality of original sin in everyone who is conceived by human parents. Even though their death was a holy service to God, they were still little sinners in need of the righteousness that He would fulfill in the Son of Mary.

They were not the innocent Christ, but they were killed because evil men hated the promise of the Christ. Satan still encourages people to kill young children out of hatred for God’s Word; our society calls it “abortion”. Selfish hearts hate the 5th and 6th Commandments of God, and they hate the idea that they are sinners who need the Lord’s Word and Spirit to bring them forgiveness and righteousness. Like Herod, they seek to keep their corrupt kingdoms and lifestyles, even by atrocious means.

But the Lord and His Church cannot be silenced by murder. Instead, it is through death that the gracious will of God is most boldly proclaimed. Christ was innocent in every way, and yet He was murdered by evil men who hated His Word. Through that monumental death on the cross God brings forgiveness and everlasting life to all who believe and are made the children of His Church by His Word and Sacraments.

Prayer: O God, whose martyred innocents showed forth Thy praise not by speaking but by dying, mortify all vices within us that our lives may in deed confess Thy faith which our tongue uttereth; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 1: COLOSSIANS 1:12-23 1ST S. IN ADVENT

Our Lord Jesus Christ prophesies in Matthew 24:14, “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.” This prophecy was fulfilled already in the time of the Apostles, for St. Paul speaks of “the gospel ... which was preached to every creature under heaven.” If the Gospel has been preached to every creature, then nothing prevents our Lord from returning any moment.

Advent is a time of sober and urgent reflection. The Christ is coming; who is ready to meet Him? Those ready to meet the Christ are those who “continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel.” Now, this “continuing in the faith” is not a work of ours but, as it says, “[the Father] has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood.” God the Father makes us ready for the Christ’s return through the blood of His Son and through faith which is sown by the Holy Spirit.

Who, then, is prepared for the Advent of the Christ? The Christian Church and all her true members are prepared, who trust by faith in the salvation of Christ’s blood.

Prayer: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

The Old Testament tabernacle—and later the temple which Solomon built—had two chambers: the Holy Place and the Holiest Place. The second contained the ark of the covenant, on which was the mercy seat of God, and signified the very throne room of heaven. Between these chambers was a veil, so that one could not approach the throne of God without first making atonement for sin. When the Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, this veil was torn in two, showing that the earthly symbols were no longer needed, for the Christ Himself is the true Veil—that is, He is the entryway into the throne room of God.

Verse 20 says that we enter the Holiest—which is the presence of God—“through the veil, that is, His flesh.” Christ’s flesh is the veil because, through His flesh, men are united with God. Because He rose from the dead in the flesh, our flesh will also be raised from the dead when He comes again.

The Advent of the Christ means the replacement of the old with the new. At His first Advent He fulfilled and replaced the earthly temple with His own flesh and blood. At His second Advent He will take our old sinful flesh and make it new and holy. At that time, those who believe in Him will dwell forever in the holy presence of God.

Prayer: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord Sunday after ChristMass

Chapter XIII.

In the town of Eisenach in Thuringia there was, to our knowledge, a monk, John Hilten, who thirty years ago was cast by his fraternity into prison, because he had protested against certain most notorious abuses. For we have seen his writings, from which it can be well understood what the nature of his doctrine was. And those who knew him testify that he was a mild old man, and serious indeed, but without moroseness. He predicted many things, some of which have thus far transpired, and others still seem to impend, which we do not wish to recite, lest it may be inferred that they are narrated either from hatred toward one or from partiality to another. But finally when, either on account of his age or the foulness of the prison, he fell into disease, he sent for the guardian, in order to tell him of his sickness; and when the guardian, inflamed with pharisaic hatred, had begun to reprove the man harshly on account of his kind of doctrine which seemed to be injurious to the kitchen; then, passing by the mention of his sickness, he said with a sigh that he had borne these injuries patiently for Christ’s sake, since he had indeed neither written nor taught anything which could overthrow the position of the monks, but had only protested against some well-known abuses. “But another one,” he said, “will come in A.D. 1516, who will destroy you, neither will you be able to resist him.” This very opinion concerning the downward career of the power of the monks, and this number of years, his friends afterwards found also written by him in his Commentaries, which he had left, concerning certain passages of Daniel. But although the issue will teach how much weight should be given to this declaration, yet there are other signs which threaten a change in the power of the monks, that are no less certain than oracles. For it is evident how much hypocrisy, ambition, avarice there is in the monasteries, how much ignorance and cruelty among all the unlearned, what vanity in their sermons and in devising continually new means of gaining money. And there are other faults, which we do not care about mentioning. Although they once were schools for Christian instruction, now they have degenerated as though from a golden age to an iron age, as the Platonic cube degenerates into bad harmonies, which Plato says brings destruction. All the most wealthy monasteries support only an idle crowd, which gluttonizes upon the public alms of the Church. Christ, however, teaches concerning the salt that has lost its savor, that it should be cast out and be trodden under foot (Matt. 5:13). Wherefore the monks by such morals singing their own fate [requiem]. And now another sign is added, because they are, in many places, the instigators of the death of good men. These murders God undoubtedly will shortly avenge. ...

—Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Art. XXVII, §1–7

The heavenly choir had filled the night sky with the sound of singing. Their song proclaimed that the Lord Jesus, the Savior of the world, was born. The shepherds who heard this message went with haste, even as the Virgin went with haste to share this good news with Elizabeth. Just as Mary found the things that were told her about Elizabeth to be true, so too, the shepherds found it exactly as the angel proclaimed to them. They in turn made these events widely known.

This Child would suffer and die for the sins of the whole world, so that all those who believe on Him would be justified. St. Stephen, whose festival is today, also proclaimed this Child who had become a man. He preached that this Man was the Savior of all mankind, that He had come to redeem His people from sin, death, and the power of the devil. For this Stephen was stoned to death. He saw our Lord sitting on the right hand of the Father, interceding for us poor sinners. Let us go into the world with haste and share this good news!

Prayer: Grant, O Lord, that in all our sufferings here upon Earth for the testimony of Thy truth we may steadfastly look up to Heaven and by faith behold the glory that shall be revealed; and, being filled with the Holy Ghost, may learn to love and bless our persecutors by the example of Thy first martyr, Saint Stephen, who prayed for his murderers to Thee, O Blessed Jesus, who stands at the right hand of God to help all those who suffer for Thee, our only Mediator and Advocate; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

There are four kinds of Sabbath rest: 1) the seventh day of the week, 2) the Christ Himself, 3) faith in the Christ, and 4) the Resurrection of the Last Day. The first Sabbath is that seventh day of the week in which the Jews of old were commanded to rest from physical labor. This Sabbath is fulfilled and ended in the second Sabbath, which is the Lord Jesus Christ. Because He is the Sabbath Rest of God, everyone who believes in Him enjoys an endless spiritual peace—the peace of being reconciled to God and of being forgiven of all sins; this is the third Sabbath. The fourth Sabbath is the Resurrection of the dead, which will occur on the Last Day. At that time the spiritual rest which the saints enjoy now through faith will also become a bodily rest, as they enjoy everlasting perfection of body, soul, and spirit in the presence of their Savior.

This Advent we rejoice to know that our Lord and Savior has come to give us rest. Most importantly, He has given us rest from sin, from guilt, and from the fear of God’s wrath. But, when He returns on the Last Day, He will also give us rest from pain, from sorrow, from death, and from all the weaknesses of this fallen world.

Prayer: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Satan has many tools to draw men away from the Truth of the Gospel. He does not always use bodily persecution and violence; sometimes he uses distraction. False prophets tell us to look for the second Advent of the Christ in this or that sign, calculation, or leader. For his part, the devil does not care what we focus on, as long it is not the Christ and His Word.

So, the Lord says, “They will say to you, ‘Look here!’ or ‘Look there!’ Do not go after them.” The kingdom of God is a matter of faith; it is found wherever true believers are gathered in the name of the Triune God—this is what it means when He says, “the kingdom of God is within you.” As for His coming, there will be no secret sign or calculation, for the Christ will appear as lightning, which is seen even by those who did not look for it.

Christ’s first Advent was thus visible to all—His birth was heralded by angels; at His death the dead rose and the temple curtain was torn in two; from His resurrection and ascension His Gospel spread to every corner of the world. Likewise, at His second and final Advent, all will see Him—even those who did not look for Him. This Advent season the Church remains focused on the Christ, who suffered, died, and rose for her salvation.

Prayer: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

In St. Matthew’s Gospel only St. Joseph receives an announcement of the Lord’s birth. In St. Luke’s Gospel it is completely different. Zacharias is first told that he and his wife would bear a son, who would be the forerunner of the Christ. Then the Blessed Virgin Mary also received an announcement that she would bear the Savior of the world. She went with haste to the hill country of Judah, and there met her relative Elizabeth. Elizabeth and the unborn child in her womb also received the announcement of the coming birth of the Savior.

The announcing of our Lord’s birth finds its climax today. There were shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night, when an angel of the Lord appeared to them to tell them that their Savior—the Savior of the world—was born this night in the city of King David. Soon the whole night sky shone with the glory of Heaven as the heavenly choir sang out, “Glory to God in the highest, and on Earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

That message, which has been quieted throughout the penitential season of Advent, is now sung once again. Indeed, we sing this proclamation throughout the Church’s year, except in the penitential seasons. This message is so wonderful to hear that historically this song on Christmas was accompanied with the ringing of all the bells. Just as we hear this proclamation when we sing this song, the whole world is made to hear that their Savior has been born.

Prayer: Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that the new birth of Thine Only-Begotten Son in the flesh may set us free, who are held in the old bondage under the yoke of sin; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

The Vigil of the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord provides for us the first proclamation of our Lord's birth at the end of the penitential season of Advent. It has prepared us to meet our Lord and Savior in our flesh. The reading for today gives us one more preparation. St. Joseph must also be prepared to receive our Lord Jesus. His betrothed wife, Mary, is found to be with Child of the Holy Ghost.

If this happened to any of us it would give us pause. St. Matthew tells us that St. Joseph, being a just man and not wanting to publicly shame her, decided to put her away secretly. However, while he thought on these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and prepared him to receive the Child and His mother. Just as this day provides us with the first proclamation of our Lord's birth, St. Joseph is the first person recorded in St. Matthew's Gospel to hear of his Lord's birth.

This Child has come to be our Savior from sin, death, and the power of the devil. He has come to lead us out of darkness into His eternal light. Through the preaching of the Gospel we have come to know the Mysteries of that Light. His messengers have been sent to proclaim to us to cling in faith to this Child, for in Him is found life and light.

Prayer: O God, who hast made this most holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light, grant, we beseech Thee, that, as we have known on Earth the mysteries of that Light, we may also come to the fullness of its joys in Heaven; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

God has revealed Himself to mankind in two places: nature and the Scriptures. That which we learn from nature we call the "natural knowledge of God," because we can learn it by observing the design of God's creation. That which we learn from the Scriptures we call the "revealed knowledge of God," because we cannot know these things about God unless He teaches us about Himself in His Word.

The natural knowledge of God is very limited. Man can know, in some sense, that God exists, that He is almighty, and that there is a judgement for sin. But God's mercy, His love, and His plan of salvation are completely unknowable through nature, as St. Paul says elsewhere: "The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him" (1 Corinthians 2:14). Also, the Formula of Concord confesses, "The knowledge of God derived from the Gospel is far different from that which is taught and learned from the Law, because even the heathen had to a certain extent, from the natural law, a knowledge of God, although they neither knew Him aright nor glorified Him" (FC-SD II:22).

Therefore, God gave us His Word so that we would know Him according to His Gospel. This Advent, the Church gives thanks for the coming of the Christ, who is the Word made flesh. He has revealed God to us, and especially revealed His salvation through faith in Christ.

Prayer: Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord

Second Sunday in Advent

Article XVII.

Also, they [the Lutherans] teach, that, at the Consummation of the World, Christ shall appear for judgment, and shall raise up all the dead; He shall give to the godly and elect eternal life and everlasting joys, but ungodly men and the devils He shall condemn to be tormented without end.

They condemn the Anabaptists who think that there will be an end to the punishments of condemned men and devils. They condemn also others, who are now spreading certain Jewish opinions that, before the resurrection of the dead, the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed [exterminated].

—The Augsburg Confession

WEDNESDAY, DEC. 23: 1 COR. 2:6-10 FESTIVAL OF ST. THORLAK

The Festival of St. Thorlak Thorhallson of Iceland is celebrated on the day of his death in the year 1193 AD. December 23rd is the last day of preparations before the Vigil of the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord, as is reflected in today's Collect. We turn our attention away from Advent preparations to the feast of our Lord's birth. That our Lord Jesus would take upon Himself our flesh and humble Himself to be a part of His creation does not fit the wisdom of the world.

St. Paul wrote in his first epistle to the Church at Corinth that they spoke wisdom, but not the wisdom of the world. This wisdom was ordained from before the foundations of the world. It was the Lord God's plan all along to be a part of His creation. The world leads one to believe that the Lord God's plan was messed up by the sin of Adam and Eve, and then He had to come up with a way to fix it. But the plan of man's salvation through the incarnation of the Lord God is part of His divine power, which is revealed according to His holy Mysteries. This is the wisdom which St. Paul preached and the wisdom we will soon celebrate.

Prayer: Merciful God, graciously look upon Thy Church here on Earth. Strengthen Thy congregation and give Thy Church comfort and peace. Teach the leaders of Thy Church to unite against all obstacles to Thy Word. Guide those who are tempted. Comfort those who suffer any want of body or soul. Prepare Thy congregation to make ready to sincerely and faithfully celebrate the holy feast of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

In his first Epistle St. John tells us that the One who was from the beginning, that is, the Lord God, is the same person who they had looked upon and handled. Yesterday was the Festival of St. Thomas, where we are reminded of his doubt that the Lord Jesus had risen from the dead, and that he would not believe unless he could put his fingers into the wounds of our Lord Jesus. St. John tells us that that is exactly what all the Apostles did. After His resurrection from the dead, they looked upon and touched the risen Lord Jesus, even as they did prior to His death.

This is why the Lord Jesus has come into the world and taken upon Himself our flesh, so that He might bring us out of death into life; that He might take us out of darkness into light. He has come down to take upon Himself our flesh so that we might have life and light, and be freed from the bonds of sin, death, and the power of the devil. St. John says that “God is light and in Him is no darkness.” He removes the darkness from us and fills us with light and life when through faith in Him we are united in fellowship with Him. Indeed, the whole body of the Church, all of us who cling to Him in faith, are united in one fellowship. In this Church we look upon and touch our Lord through the means of grace.

Prayer: Stir up, O Lord, we beseech Thee, Thy power, and come and help us with Thy great might, that by Thy grace whatsoever is hindered by our sins may be speedily accomplished through Thy mercy and satisfaction; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

“...God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.”

God will judge, according to “my” gospel, the Apostle says. His Gospel? Well, yes, in this very important sense: the Gospel does not float around out there in the ether somewhere. God locates it in men. In this case, in the person and preaching of St. Paul.

Today we celebrate the festival of St. Ambrose, the ancient bishop of Milan and counselor to St. Monika, mother of St. Augustine. Why do we celebrate saints’ days? Not because we want them to help us lobby God for whatever we want, or because we want credit for some of their “extra” good works. And certainly not because we think they each have special departments where they give special help (St. Ambrose is, among other things, considered the “patron saint” of beekeepers). No, we celebrate because 1. God saved them, 2. God used them to accomplish good in this world, and 3. we pray that God would help us to follow their good example.

Ambrose was a man in whom God located the Gospel. He confessed the Faith clearly. The Gospel God located in him saved many in his day. God has the same use of the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ that He has located in each of us.

Prayer: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Thine only-begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve Thee with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

“Then Mary said, ‘Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word’.”

Our Lord chose Mary to be the vessel by which the Savior was brought into the world. In the movie “the Nativity,” the question is placed in Mary’s mouth, “Why me? Why was I chosen?” And she adds, “I am nothing.” We might ask the same questions. But the answer is, “exactly!” As we recognize our own “nothingness,” it is made all the clearer that whatever use God has of us is His doing, and whatever grace is given us is indeed His gift.

The angel Gabriel appears to the blessed Virgin Mary, and declares to her God’s intention. She does not doubt God’s Word, she inquires only about logistics; “how is this going to work?” Once the angel answers, she gives the faithful words we read above: “Let it be to me according to your word.”

The Lord has His use of our lives. Often, that is not what we had planned. God grant us, like St. Mary, to submit to the plans He has for us, to rejoice in them, and at the last to receive our heavenly reward through faith in Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Thine only-begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve Thee with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

On the Festival of St. Thomas, the day with the longest amount of darkness, the Church’s focus is directed to the Light of the World—our Lord Jesus Christ. The Blessed Virgin Mary, after receiving the annunciation that she would be the mother of our Lord, went with haste into the hill country to her relative Elizabeth, who was six months pregnant with the Forerunner. Upon hearing her greeting the babe in her womb leaped.

The Lord Jesus had come to His people. The Lord God had taken on our flesh. Even though it was only a few days since the Holy Ghost had overshadowed the Virgin with the power of the highest and conceived our Lord Jesus in her womb, the infant in Elizabeth’s womb recognized the great gift that our Lord has given to mankind. The Light of the World had come into this world filled with the darkness of sin to bring holy light. He has come to remove the darkness of sin from us, so that we may live in His eternal light.

“Doubting Thomas” believed on the Lord Jesus when he saw His hands, feet, and side. Our doubt is also removed when we hear that our Lord Jesus has come down from Heaven to dwell with us poor, miserable sinners. He has come to win forgiveness, life, and salvation for us. He has come to fill us with the light of faith, so that believing on Him we may no longer live in the darkness of sin and death.

Prayer: Almighty and Ever-Living God, who through the Word of Thy Son didst mightily strengthen the faith of Thine Apostle Saint Thomas, by the same Word keep us ever steadfast in the faith unto our end; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Article IX.

Of Baptism, they [the Lutherans] teach, that it is necessary to salvation, and that through Baptism is offered the grace of God; and that children are to be baptized, who, being offered to God through Baptism, and received into His grace.

They condemn the Anabaptists, who allow not the Baptism of children, and say that children are saved without Baptism.

—The Augsburg Confession

V. Of Baptism.

Baptism is nothing else than the Word of God [with mersion] in the water, commanded by His institution, or as Paul says: “A washing in the Word”; just as Augustine also says: “The Word comes to the element, and it becomes a sacrament.” Therefore, we do not hold with Thomas and the monastic preachers or Dominicans, who forget the Word (God’s institution) and say that God has imparted to the water a spiritual power which, through the water, washes away sin. Nor do we agree with Scotus and the Barefooted monks [Minorites or Franciscan monks], who teach that, by the assistance of the divine will, baptism washes away sins, and that this ablution occurs only through the will of God, and by no means through the Word and water.

Of the baptism of children, we hold that children ought to be baptized. For they belong to the promised redemption made through Christ, and the Church should administer it to them.

—The Smalcald Articles, Part III.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 9: 2 TIM. 3:10-17 2ND S. IN ADVENT

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

God has inspired all Scripture. And that Scripture is given that “the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Note those words: complete, thoroughly, every. One of the hedges that some people wrongly use on the Scriptures goes something like this: “Yes, the Scriptures speak in a general way to situations such as this. But they do not envision my specific circumstances. So they do not really apply in my case.” This is an evasion of the doctrine of sufficiency. And that is what those words--complete, thoroughly, every--are telling us. The Scriptures are sufficient, and clear.

As life comes at us, it may take some time, study, contemplation, and prayer to understand how the Scriptures apply to our specific circumstances. But they do apply. Everything you need--for doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction in righteousness--is right there. At the core is the simple basis of Law and Gospel, repentance and the forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ Jesus. God grant us repentance and humility to look to His Word for all wisdom.

Prayer: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Thine only-begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve Thee with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

“Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.”

Grace and peace be multiplied to you. Especially for non-church people, that is odd English. We often hear these words as our Pastor begins preaching, but even for us, it is “Church English.” No one at Wal-Mart talks like that.

There is a reason for the awkwardness. The Word of God does what it says! This is not just a pious wish: “May grace and peace be yours..., I hope grace and peace will be yours..., it sure would be nice if grace and peace were yours.” No. “Grace and peace to you.” The words do what they say. They put grace and peace to you. And what better place to gain the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord than in a solid, orthodox sermon!

We ought not turn God’s gifts into something iffy. Where the Lord has used His mouthpiece Pastor to speak these words to you, believe them. And as you grow in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, the words that impart that knowledge to you will impart still more grace and peace to you; the grace of faith, and the peace of sins forgiven.

Prayer: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Thine only-begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve Thee with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

John’s hearers hear how the axe is laid at the root of the trees to cut down all trees that do not bear good fruit. The people ask what they are to do. Repenting and believing in the coming Christ who will take away their sins, they are to bear the fruits of repentance. Tax collectors are to collect no more than appointed, no longer using their vocation to enrich themselves at the expense of others. Soldiers are to be content with wages and not use their vocation to intimidate others. What do we learn from this about the fruits of repentance?

The fruits of repentance are the virtues opposite of the sin committed. Paul demonstrates this in Ephesians 4:28, “Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.” The thief is to labor. The one with an adulterous eye is to pursue chastity. The false witness is to speak the truth and defend his neighbor’s reputation. The covetous person is to be content with his daily bread.

We also see that fruits of repentance are born in our vocations toward others. That is because the fruits of repentance--sorrow over sin and faith in Christ’s forgiveness--leads us to love our neighbors and work for their well-being. The fruits of repentance are revealed as we walk in the Law of the Lord, and “Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:10).

Prayer: Lord, we beseech Thee, give ear to our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Thy gracious visitation; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

John is the greatest among those born of women because he is the forerunner of the Christ. He is the final prophet of the Old Testament. Yet he is more than a prophet. He is the Elijah to come, pointing to the Christ Himself. In spite of this great honor Jesus says, “But he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” The blessings of the New Covenant are far greater than those of the old, since we get to see and hear things that prophets and kings only desired to see and hear. The preaching of John and Jesus open wide the door to the kingdom of heaven.

That is why the kingdom suffers violence and the violent take it by force. People heard the preaching of John and Jesus and believed. They let nothing stand in their way from hearing the Gospel. They cast aside their sins in repentance and confession. They rushed into the kingdom of God by believing John’s word about Christ taking away their sins, and Jesus’ words of mercy and forgiveness for the penitent.

John still preaches through his message recorded in Holy Scripture. He still commands all men everywhere to repent of their sins each day and amend their lives. He still points to Christ who has atoned for our sins and takes them away when we repent and believe the Gospel. Let nothing stand between you and the kingdom of God. Be one who takes the kingdom by force; not the forcefulness of physical strength, but the force of faith, which lets nothing deter you from believing the Gospel.

Prayer: Lord, we beseech Thee, give ear to our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Thy gracious visitation. Amen.

“Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ.”

Patience. That is a word that seems almost arcane. We live in an instant-gratification society. If we go to a drive-thru, we want our food fast. Once the computer comes out that fires up in ten seconds, we become irritated when ours takes 30 seconds. We want what we want, when we want it. And we sometimes take that attitude into our prayers. We petition God for aid, and when He takes longer, or the help is of a different kind than we asked for, we can even find ourselves irritated with Him! What is the solution?

Gratitude. By way of His Word, we are reminded of all that Christ has done for us, and our love for God grows. As He works in us by Word and Spirit, we trust Him more, including trust in His time table. Our hearts are directed into the patience of Christ. God grant us this! God grant us to pray, “Thy will be done,” and really mean it, rather than halfway still seeking our own will. God’s will is better. In Christ Jesus, He loves us perfectly. And so we love Him. We trust Him. And we patiently wait for the unfolding of His gracious will, and ultimately for the coming in glory of Christ Jesus our Savior.

Prayer: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Thine only-begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve Thee with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

“And Jesus, answering them, began to say: ‘Take heed that no one deceives you’.”

Jesus speaks to His disciples about the coming end times, that is, the days between His first coming as a baby and His second coming in glory. Hardships will come, even upon His faithful ones. But the hardships that so often occupy our attention should really be secondary in our minds. The bigger issue is that we remain in the one true Faith. The bigger issue is to take heed that no one deceives us.

Satan’s deceptions are many. There are very heady scientific and philosophical arguments against the Faith. There are the far more carnal arguments about the “fun of sinning.” And there are many organized false religions with their competing (and false) truth claims. Do not be deceived. You are a sinner. God has become flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, and suffered for all of the wages of your sin. You are forgiven. And our Lord will come again in glory, our bodies will be raised, and we will live with Him forever in His eternal glory. God grant us grace to keep us in this one true faith, unto life everlasting, for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Thine only-begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve Thee with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

Jesus is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. This is Christ’s continuous and enduring work. How does He do this? First, by making full atonement for our sins. Christ pays the full price for all of our sins of deed, word, and thought. Since sin is the work of sinners and the devil, it is finite. Christ’s death is an infinite sacrifice for sin because Christ is fully God as well as fully man. Christ’s atonement is for the sins of the world, so there is no sin or sinner who falls outside of the power of Christ’s atonement.

Second, He takes away our sin whenever we believe the Gospel. When we believe the Gospel of Christ God applies Christ’s atonement to us individually. He does this through the Word and Sacraments. Sinners are justified by faith, so whenever a sinner repents of his sins, seeks to amend his ways, and believes that Christ’s atonement covers his sins, Christ is taking away sins.

Finally, Christ takes away sins in each one of us each day in sanctification. Christ dwells in our hearts by faith, so it is no longer we that live, but Christ who lives in us. By the power of the Holy Spirit we put to death the sinful flesh each day, crucifying it with its passions and desires. This, too, is Christ taking away our sin so that we grow in holiness and righteousness. This will never be complete in this life because we live in the sinful flesh. But Christ wants to take away our sins like this each day and conform us more and more to His image.

Prayer: Lord, we beseech Thee, give ear to our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Thy gracious visitation. Amen.

With John's birth God begins His gracious visitation by which He will redeem His people. He is delivering them from the hands of their enemies as was promised to their fathers, especially God's oath to Abraham. These enemies are not national enemies. The enemies of God's people are not the Babylonians, Persians, Syrians, or Romans. The true enemies from which Israel needs salvation are sin, death, and the power of the devil.

That is why this child will "go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways." How? "To give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercies of our God." John came preaching repentance. "Be sorry for your sins. Confess them. Turn from them and pursue virtue rather than your sin! Receive the forgiveness of sins, not on account of anything you've done, but through the tender mercies of our God." The Holy Spirit teaches us the ministry of the New Testament through Zacharias' words.

This forgiveness and salvation gives us eternal life. But it has a purpose in this life as well. "To grant that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life." We are forgiven through faith in Christ, so we are to strive for holiness and righteousness each day of our lives. God wants us to forsake our sins and serve others in love, serving Him without fear, but in joy and love, because He fulfills His promise.

Prayer: Lord, we beseech Thee, give ear to our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Thy gracious visitation; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord Third Sunday in Advent

Article V.

That we may obtain this faith, the Office of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who worketh faith where and when it pleaseth God in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justified those who believe that they are received into favor for Christ's sake.

They condemn the Anabaptists and others, who think that the Holy Ghost cometh to men without the external Word, through their own preparations and works.

—The Augsburg Confession

Article XVI.

Of Political Order.

The sixteenth article the adversaries receive without any exception, in which we have confessed that it is lawful for the Christian to bear civil office, sit in judgment, determine matters by the imperial laws, and other laws in present force, appoint just punishments, engage in just wars, act as a soldier, make legal contracts, hold property, take an oath when magistrates require it, contract marriage; finally, that legitimate civil ordinances are good creatures of God and divine ordinances, which a Christian can use with safety. The entire topic concerning the distinction between the kingdom of Christ and a political kingdom has been explained to advantage in the literature of our writers, that the kingdom of Christ is spiritual, to wit, that it is in the heart the knowledge of God, and fear and faith in God, beginning eternal righteousness and eternal life; meanwhile it permits us outwardly to use legitimate political ordinances of every nation in which we live, just as it permits us to use medicine or the art of building, or food, drink, air. Neither does the Gospel bring new laws concerning the civil state, but commands that we obey present laws, whether they have been framed by heathen or by others, and that in this obedience we should exercise love.

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, §53–55a

Zacharias and Elizabeth “were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.” This doesn’t mean they had no sin. It means they were righteous by faith just as their ancestor Abraham was righteous before God, not on account of his works, but because He believed God’s Word. Because they were righteous by faith they walked in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord. The commandments are the moral commands. The ordinances are the ceremonial Law of Moses. They walked blameless in these, that is, without any cause of public judgment.

Yet in spite of their faithfulness, Elizabeth was barren. God often allows afflictions to befall believers. Plans and desires are frustrated. Things don’t go as we would like. Our bodies decay and become diseased. Our sinful flesh daily tempts and entices us to sin so that our love for others is impure and incomplete. We bear these and other afflictions, praying for patience under our crosses even as we pray the Lord removes them.

To this faithful yet afflicted couple, the Lord promises a son, who will turn their mourning into joy and gladness. The child will “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (1:17). This child brings us joy and gladness as well. God is faithful to His promises! He does not leave us to our afflictions, especially the affliction of sin, death, and the devil, but delivers us by turning us to the Lord in repentance and faith so that we also are righteous before God. Being justified by faith, we walk blameless in all His commandments because the Holy Spirit dwells in our hearts.

Prayer: Lord, we beseech Thee, give ear to our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Thy gracious visitation. Amen.

Elizabeth conceives and bears a son. The angel’s words to Zacharias in 1:14 are also fulfilled, for their neighbors and relatives rejoiced with her. When it comes time to circumcise and name the child, Elizabeth insists that he is to be named John. When the protesting family members turn to Zacharias, they receive the same answer, only in written form. Zacharias had to write this out because Gabriel had struck him dumb in 1:20 because he didn’t initially believe God’s Word spoken through the angel. By this time Zacharias has repented of his unbelief and obeys God’s Word, naming the child John. This loosens His tongue. The Lord opened Zacharias’ lips and brought forth His praise.

From this we see two things. First, God fulfills His promises in due time. Whether it is the promise of a child to Zacharias and Elizabeth or the promise to forgive the sins of all who truly repent, God is faithful. God cannot lie, so when He speaks He speaks truth. This should move us to confidently believe His Word in Holy Scripture, as well as His Word spoken by His called and ordained servants. God will not let any of His promises fall to the ground.

Second, this shows us that God punishes unbelief. Since He cannot lie and promises us such great things in His Word, He wants us to take Him at His Word. Zacharias was struck dumb for his unbelief. It was only repentance, faith in God’s promise, and the fruit of repentance that opened his mouth. So we should cut off every temptation to disbelieve God’s promises to us and pray for an increase of faith each day.

Prayer: Lord, we beseech Thee, give ear to our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Thy gracious visitation. Amen.