

Celebrate Wonder
and Joy.



2019 ADVENT
DEVOTIONAL



ALLEGHENY LUTHERAN
SOCIAL MINISTRIES

We Touch Lives

Greetings!

It is with joyful hearts that we offer this devotional booklet created by our ALSM team of staff, board, volunteers, pastors, and others associated with ALSM. Thanks to all who shared their talents. A special thanks to Pastor Ralph Hamer, our Director of Pastoral Care and Congregational Relations, who coordinated this effort.

It is our hope these reflections will give you an opportunity to pause each day to ponder your blessings and experience the joy of the season.

May you and your loved ones enjoy a peaceful and blessed Advent.

Patricia Savage
and the ALSM community

THURSDAY

November 28

James 4:1-10



In the fourth chapter of James, we read, “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill.” James was addressing matters of the heart, “the spirit [God] has caused to dwell in us.” Sometimes, in this troubled world, the vain desire for riches, control, power, and undeserved resources have led us to kill. On a large scale, that killing is called war. And yet, even in the midst of bloodshed and terror, humans have the capacity to turn away from the fierce demands of the world and accept a moment of grace. Celebrating the birth of Christ did just that on Christmas Eve, 1914 in the trenches of France. A young British soldier, Graham Williams, recalled the event:

“First the Germans would sing one of their carols and then we would sing one of ours, until when we started up ‘O Come, All Ye Faithful’ the Germans immediately joined in singing the same hymn to the Latin words *Adeste Fideles*. And I thought, well, this is really a most extraordinary thing—two nations both singing the same carol in the middle of a war.”

There is grace in the Christmas Truce, and there is a lesson. The way of the world is not God’s way. It conflicts with the teachings of our Lord. At all times, but especially at Christmas, we need to step back, reflect on the wisdom that God has provided us, and continuously treasure the greatest gift of all, the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Lord, help us to turn away from the way of the world and accept your teachings in this time of anticipation. Amen.

Dr. Patricia Savage

President & CEO

Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

Member of Zion Lutheran Church. Hollidaysburg

FRIDAY
November 29
Hebrews 11:1-7



“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. 2 This is what the ancients were commended for.”

A cup of hot chocolate, a warm blanket, and a comfy couch; all settled in now to watch my Christmas movies. What shall I watch? Flipping through the channels, “A Miracle on 34th Street,” “A Christmas Carol,”... this looks interesting, “By God’s Grace,” and it’s about a guy named Chris. In the movie, Chris loses his father, mother, and sister at Christmas. This **causes** Chris to lose his faith in God and to lose sight of the bigger picture. Then Grace came to him. What Grace represented was faith in what is good. Grace shows Chris that when we lose sight of goodness it negatively **affects** all aspects of our life.

The Christmas season to me is a renewal of my **faith**. Christmas helps me reflect on what is **good**. The birth of Jesus represents good. It is my belief in good and my faith, “In God I Trust.”

Watch the movie, I hope you will enjoy it! Think about the bold words, Cause, Affect, Faith, equals Good.

Prayer: Thank you Lord for the gift of Faith. Lord allow my faith in you, give me the strength to focus on the good, and to do good for others, Amen.

Christopher Reighard

Senior Vice President for Finance and Planning

Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

Member of Saint John the Evangelist Church, Altoona

SATURDAY
November 30
Matthew 24:1-22



The preparation for the baby of Light that shines in the darkness is a time to cleanse our lives and be aware that our past unloving ways will be cut short and an offering of joy and hope will fill our new world.

In the church, we call this the time of Advent. In our world outside the church, we simply say, “we are preparing and getting ready for Christmas (the holidays)”. Often we are asked, “are you ready for Christmas yet?” Preparing for the world to change can be taxing, yet it is a time of hope filled with contentment and knowledge of a life sustaining future with God.

Getting ready for a magnificent baby sent by God that will wonderfully change our lives in a way that is filled with love and safety. This time of Advent gives us space to make way for the greatest gift we will ever be given.

I trust that most of us fear change. I also believe that the key to change is to be able to adapt and change while also providing an authentic and safe place to grow in faith. The reading from Matthew 24:1-22 gives us this safe place to hope and prepares us for what is being foretold in this Scripture. We are warned that “false prophets” will attempt to lead us astray and “the love of many will grow cold”. All the while we are being assured in verses 13-14: 13” But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 14 And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come.”

The end is our constant new beginning in Emmanuel; the Christ Child; the Light of the world; God with us; now and always.

Prayer: Let us pray: God of love and blessing, thank you for your binding gifts of presence and hope. Thank you that we have been saved by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. We give You all the glory here and now, and we praise You for Your goodness and grace for all; now and always. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

The Reverend Susan Williamson
Member of ALSM Governance Committee
Ferguson Twp., Lutheran Ministry- Serving
Pine Hall and Gatesburg Congregations
State College and Warriors Mark

SUNDAY
December 1

Matthew 24:36-44



Back in college, we used to joke that if we weren't prepared for anything else, we would be well prepared for waiting. It seemed as though we spent hours standing in line for meals, to register for classes, or to get tickets for events. This time of year, our watching seems focused in a more joyous way as we wait for the coming of the Lord as a babe in a manger.

Thinking back over my life, I can remember joyous anticipation in a number of circumstances. And it seems that no matter how old I get there is still a child-like excitement that is alive in me: the Holy Spirit lighting the way to the wonder that is to come.

This Advent season takes on a special joy as my family waits to welcome a new little fellow to our midst, elevating me to Great-Grandma status. Emmanuel, God is with us in the waiting, in the anticipation, in our joys and in our fears. We can keep watch knowing that He is ever near us.

Prayer: God of Grace, we know that you are with us in the mundane and in the radiant. Help us to wait, knowing your timing is perfect and you are right beside us. Amen.

Linda Weko
Worship Leader

Member of Zion Lutheran Church, Williamsburg

MONDAY
December 2

Romans 6:1-11



What then are we to say? Just as Paul begins the sixth chapter of this letter to the church at Rome, we probably all recall the beginning to chapter 8. What then are we to say about these things, if God is for us, who is against us. I pondered about the opening words here and their connection to chapter eight. What are we to say? It is apparent that Paul is indicating that we are evangelists. We are supposed to be about saying things. Making statements maybe as someone much wiser than I who say: “proclaim the Gospel, if necessary, use words.” As we continue in these Advent devotions, we are encouraged to ‘Celebrate Wonder and Joy’. Here Paul admonishes us to live in response to that which we claim to know to be the truth of the Gospel. ‘We know that our old self was crucified with him.... We believe that we will also live with him.... We know that Christ has been raised.’ As I write this devotional, I do so in the shadow of the funeral service of our organist who served faithfully here for 29 years. That is a lifetime of dedication and devotion to God. These words obviously touch a chord for each of us as we recall them possibly read at the funeral of a loved one. They are written to remind us of the promise of eternal life. Throughout my ministry, I have come to reframe and reword the language often used in funerals that speak of eternal rest in place of my own theological understanding of eternal life. I pray that the kingdom of God is not simply rest, but is full of moments in which we can Celebrate Wonder and Joy; and even more than moments filled to the fullness of time with that celebration. Let us consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Being alive in Christ, let us live no longer bound by the things of earth, but set free to celebrate, joy – peace – love – life. Thanks be to God.

Prayer: Let us pray. We are yours, heavenly Father, named and in the waters of baptism and anointed with your Holy Spirit to be evangelists, spreading the good news of a great joy. As we celebrate the wonder of this season, fill us with joy and empower us to share that joy with others. Like love, joy is never diminished by giving it away, make us to be people of mercy, grace, joy and love, your people. In the name about all name, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

The Reverend Robert J. Way

Pastor of St. John Lutheran Church, Clearfield

Member of ALSM Congregational Relations Advisory Committee

TUESDAY
December 3
Hebrews 11:32-40



When I received the request to write a devotional for this year's Advent offering, I was happy to do so. I chose December 3rd because it is the anniversary of my marriage. Pam and I will celebrate 42 years together as husband and wife on this day. Then I looked at the text that was selected. I have always held Hebrews 11 as one of my favorites, for I believe that faith is a gift and it is the assurance of things hoped and the conviction of things unseen. Though someone else has selected those verses and you have read them this past Friday, these concluding verses from chapter 11 present that faithful living is the key to life. I will often hand someone some object, for example a pen and say that it is an example of God giving us faith. Faith is gift, remember that! Now we can stick that pen in a drawer, and it be ours, but we simply like that other pen better, it has a better grip, it writes more smoothly, it...suits us. And the pen "Faith" is relegated to being unused. Recognizing that the one who gave it to us gave it for us to use. Listed in our reading for today, we see how and where people 'exercised' faith. Some aspects are enheartening, some powerful, some frightful. Yet all of these, though they were commended for (exercising) their faith, did not receive what was promised..... Why? Since God had provided something better. That something better we call, Emmanuel. The name, the word, means God with us. God, not out there somewhere, but here with us. God came in the form of a servant to suggest that improbable and some would say impossible notion that we matter that much to God. Jesus chose to suffer and die in our place, offering the greatest blessing. Manifested in that small child, born to that young maiden and her betrothed Joseph, is the greatest gift. Have faith in that truth. Use that gift given unto us, don't hide it in a drawer, don't build a shelf to display it, but use it, to God's glory.

Prayer: Let us pray. Gracious and Holy God, you provide all that we need, in reality, you provide all that we have and are. As we enter into this season of Advent, grant us knowledge Lord of your providence. We are blessed to be a blessing to others. You have provided us with all we need to serve that purpose. For everything we give thanks in the name of Christ, by your Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Reverend Robert J. Way

Pastor of St. John Lutheran Church, Clearfield

Member of ALSM Congregational Relations Advisory Committee

WEDNESDAY
December 4

Isaiah 54:1-10



Here the prophet Isaiah speaks on God's behalf, offering words of comfort and consolation to a people who have been exiled in Babylon. The exile was a period of shame, disgrace, and humiliation for the people of Israel, but God promises them that these negative emotions will not be the last word. Instead, it is proclaimed that Jerusalem and her people will be restored. God will not allow them to continue to suffer in shame. With compassion and love God will remember the covenant and gather the people to save them and lead them into a new future.

In Advent, we continue in the same promises as the ancient Israelites who were in exile. We believe that God will come and deliver us from whatever brings us shame, disgrace, and humiliation. We believe that through our baptismal covenant God will gather us and minister to us with compassion and love. As we wait on the Lord, how can God deliver you and restore you?

Prayer: Almighty God, we give you thanks for your steadfast nature and for the compassion you have on all your people. Restore us from whatever brings us shame and guide us into the future you desire for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The Reverend David Bowman

Pastor of Zion Lutheran Church, Hollidaysburg

Member of ALSM Congregational Relations Advisory Committee

THURSDAY
December 5

Isaiah 4:2-6



From the book of Isaiah Chapter 4, on that day, the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel.... The LORD will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and its assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all the glory there will be canopy. It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.

This time of year, we celebrate the joy that comes to us in many forms. It is not always about finding happiness or having all of our wants satisfied. Sometimes, it is about survival and the many wonders around us each day that give us strength to go on. The strength we gain from those close to us and those who we may only see from a distance. While the blistering cold of the winter season may chill your toes, and weigh heavy on your heart, you may find refuge in the fellowship with friends and family around the fireplace this holiday season. Perhaps take comfort in filling your heart with song and sounds of the season.

Prayer: As we celebrate this wonderful and joyous time together, Lord, help us to share the light of Your presence and the goodness with others. To cherish our time together and for Your many gifts and unexpected blessings.

Brenda Blough

Administrator at The Lutheran Home at Johnstown
Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

FRIDAY
December 6

Isaiah 30:19-26



If you have heritage from parts of Europe, chances are you know the wonder and joy of St. Nicholas' Day (Dec. 6). If you remember to put out your shoes the night before, in the morning, you may discover that (what normally contains stinky feet) now contains an orange, a couple of coins, and a few pieces of chocolate - showing that "St. Nicholas" had come to visit.

The historical St. Nicholas was a bishop of Myra in the 4th century, with a reputation for generosity and kindness – particularly for people who were very poor. The most famous legend is that when he became aware of three impoverished girls who would be forced into a disreputable life (due to their father's inability to afford dowries for them), for three nights Nicholas secretly dropped a sack of gold coins through the window so that they would have the resources they needed. Through this and other acts of kindness and generosity, St. Nicholas would bring joy and hope to those around him. Nicholas lived out the ways of the kind and generous God whom we read about today. Isaiah reminds the people that they belong to a God who "will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you." The reading goes on to give examples of how the Lord will bring joy to the people through plenty of grain, healthy livestock, abundant sources of water. As a result, God's people "shall weep no more" and be able to see the Lord as a teacher, showing us the ways in which to walk. In this season, we too are called to see and hear the example of our God and of those who have lived out God's generosity and kindness (like Nicholas), and to learn to walk in that same way of bringing joy to those around us.

Prayer: O Lord, we take time out of the busy time of holiday preparation to remember the kindness and generosity which you have showed us and continue to show us. May we see your goodness each day and give you thanks with grateful hearts. Fashion us – like your servant Nicholas – to bear your generosity and kindness to the world who desperately needs it, that all may come to know your love and grace. We pray in the name of the one who became your Generosity in the Flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Reverend Elisa Osman

Chaplain at The Oaks at Pleasant Gap

Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

Member of Saint John's Lutheran Church, Bellefonte

SATURDAY
December 7

Isaiah 40:1-11



God wants his disciples to bring comfort to his people, to speak tenderly to his church. This is what God has asked. As we prepare for Christmas, what an amazing impact we could make if we went about our day speaking tenderly. Who among us could not benefit from a kind word? A child upset from a fall, a poor test grade or unkind words from a classmate. Perhaps a bad day at work, upsetting news from the doctor, a fight with a close friend, or a spouse who no longer recognizes their husband because dementia robbed their treasured memories. A smile, gesture, and kind word has the ability to brighten the day for anyone. To give hope and a promise that everything will be okay. Isaiah speaks of God's promise of hope. "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart."

As we prepare for the birth of Christ, let us speak tenderly to those around us and bring the gift of comfort. "Comfort, comfort my people." A comfort so wonderful, a comfort so nice, God tells it to us twice. How can we comfort another today?

Prayer: Lord, in this season of preparation allow us to be present for others to assist them in finding comfort, joy and peace. Amen.

Andrea Schurr

Director of Mission Advancement

Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

Member of Saint John the Evangelist Church, Altoona

SUNDAY
December 8

Matthew 3:1-12



Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In our reading for the day, Matthew tells of John the Baptist and his preaching of repentance. It seems to me that one way to repent is to turn and actively take on the many issues that face us today as practicing Christians in our confusing, complex and conflict-ridden world.

As we celebrate the season of Advent and the joy and hope surrounding the birth of Jesus, we are reminded that there exists far too many situations where intolerance, inequality, and injustice are prevalent. During his short earthly ministry Jesus was a champion of the poor, the outcasts, the underrepresented, and the marginalized. He challenged the status quo and spoke out against the evils of the time. May we strive to model Jesus' behaviors.

What better way to fully experience the true spirit and meaning of the Christmas season than by sharing ourselves, whether it be our time, our talents, and/or our treasures, with our brothers and sisters in need of our assistance. No act of kindness, compassion, or caring is too small or insignificant.

Advent also reminds us of the need to grow in our relationship with God and with our neighbor. We pray for the courage to stand up for the rights, dignity, and worth of all of the children of God.

Prayer: Our God in heaven, enter into our hearts this joyous season of Advent and indeed throughout the entire year. Help us to live out our faith on a daily basis and to make each day count. Be a constant presence in our lives and help us to grow in our relationship with you and with our neighbor. Amen.

Dr. Jay D. Buchanan

Lay Worship Leader

Member of Saint James Lutheran Church, Huntingdon

MONDAY
December 9



Isaiah 24:1-16a

There is not much in this passage to raise a specter of hope. The prophet declares the righteous anger and judgement of God against a disobedient people. Everything that has been known will be gone. There will be differentiation between rich and poor, cleric or lay, young or old. All bear the weight of the coming destruction. So where is the joy?

As a youth I served as the acolyte on Christmas Eve at my home church in Johnstown. One year, between the two services I went home to be with family. I walked in to a cold house, crying sisters, and frustrated parents. The furnace had quit working. The gas pilot was lit but the furnace would not “kick on”. I mentioned this to a member of the church prior to the late service beginning. Instead of attending service, he walked to my house and rewired part of the furnace that ran to the thermostat. Fortunately, he was an electrician by trade.

In the midst of a cold, frightening night, a single act of kindness brought joy and light. In the midst of all the gloom and doom of this passage from Isaiah, there are moments of hope. Ruin comes upon the Earth but the inhabitants are scattered, not destroyed. What is torn down can be rebuilt. When our vision Christmas fails to come to fruition, there can still be laughter, smiles, reunions, praises to God, and hope for what is yet to come.

Prayer: Gracious God, let us not be trapped by the materialism of the season but be set free to experience the deeper awareness of our souls soaring at the joy of Christ's birth. Bow our heads at his manger stable so we may accept the yoke of faithful discipleship. Amen.

The Reverend Ralph W. Hamer
Director of Pastoral Care and Congregational Relations
Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries
Member of Trinity Lutheran Church, Altoona

TUESDAY
December 10



Isaiah 41:14-20

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” God directs the heavenly hosts to find a way to offer words of consolation, kindness, and mercy to a careworn people. This holy word was first presented to a people separated from their homeland, a people separated from the things they held dear, and a people who feared they were separated from God. How reassuring it must have been to be reminded that God had not abandoned them! How heartening to hear that the creator of all that is, seen and unseen, was concerned about their wellbeing! How refreshing to know that their almighty God had forgiven them, would move mountains to be with them, and would continue to watch over them just as a shepherd tenderly looks after a flock of sheep!

Those same holy words of eternal comfort can reassure us, hearten us, and refresh us as we await the coming of our Lord. We can trust that God’s presence, revealed to us in so many ways, will strengthen us when we are afraid, cheer us when we feel separated from those things we hold dear, and console us in moments of doubt and despair. God’s command that we be comforted can fill us with joy, knowing that we are being taken care of as we live in the promise that God’s word of everlasting love and mercy will always be fulfilled. Living in the promise freely given to us can fill us with joy as we heed the words offered long, long ago. And not only heed the words for our sake, but follow God’s direction for the sake of the world. “Comfort, O comfort my people, says our God.” As we serve as our Lord’s voice, hands, and hearts we are able to comfort others. We are able to help God’s love enter their lives. We are able to comfort God’s people as we offer tender reassurance that, just as we are loved, forgiven, and free to live in God’s eternal presence, they are too!

Prayer: Gracious God, our hearts overflow with joy as your comforting presence is revealed to us each and every day. Strengthen and inspire us, your beloved children, as we comfort others and live in the blessed promise of eternal joy you have given the world through your son and our Savior. Amen.

The Reverend Julia Sprenkle
ALSM Board of Trustees
Pastor of Christ Lutheran Church, Johnstown

WEDNESDAY
December 11



Genesis 15:1-18

“Look He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

He also said to him, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”

Thinking about these verses, God is making promises to Abram and Abram trusts and believes in God and God made him righteous because of his unwavering trust. Have you ever promised that you would do something for someone but did not fulfill that promise? Or has someone made a promise to you that was not kept? It is never good when a promise is broken. God does not break promises! In fact as we approach the birth of Jesus we are reminded of the “promise” God made to each of us – eternal life! He gave us the gift of his son Jesus and the gift of faith that we need to receive his love, generosity and salvation.

Our ways during the holiday season have become “noisy” and “flamboyant” about the wrong things as we celebrate. Remember that in this Christmas season, the hype leading up to the birth of Jesus pales in comparison to what we truly gain!

Look up into the sky and count the stars as your blessing and give thanks to God for his grace and glory! Celebrate this Christmas season rejoicing in the birth of Christ Jesus.

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” John 8:12, NIV

Prayer: Thank you Lord for the gift of Your love. May I be a shining example of that love to others.. Amen.

Rebecca Young

Vice President of Human Resources

Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

Member of First Presbyterian Church, Hollidaysburg

THURSDAY
December 12

Ruth 1:6-18



The holiday season is one that has been filled with wonder and joy ever since I was a little girl. My parents watched my eyes light up as I woke them up at the crack of dawn to see what Santa had left – would it be the Barbie dream house that I had asked for, or a new sled or an art project? Many years later, I was again filled with joy on Christmas – this time, as I watched my own little daughter’s eyes light up as she stared at the glow of the candles that flickered during Christmas Eve worship and joined in singing Silent Night as our family worshiped together to celebrate the birth of our Savior. The joy continued as we joined with family members and friends after church for a Christmas Eve dinner with my husband’s family’s tradition of seven fishes. These joyous memories remind me of the love that was shown between Naomi and her daughters-in-law as they traveled to Judah together – as my best and brightest memories have also been ones surrounded by family as we partake in traditions and share God’s love and blessings with one another during this most holy season.

Prayer: Gracious and Loving God, during this season of joy, we rejoice in the love of family and friends and the blessings that they are in our lives. We thank you for the greatest joy that you have given to us - the birth of your son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Marty Jo Irvin-Stellabotte

Lay Worship Leader

M.Div. Student – United Lutheran Seminary

Member of First Lutheran Church, Altoona

FRIDAY
December 13

Ruth 4:13-17



The child in me still enjoys unwrapping presents at Christmas. I like wondering what might be under the pretty paper and ribbon. I carefully remove the wrappings while savoring every minute of the big reveal. Whatever the present may be, I am grateful for a gift of greater value, the pleasure of anticipation and the thoughtfulness and care of the giver.

Many of us already know the essentials of his life and his teachings. We know his life continues with resurrection life in us. But just for this season, just for this time, why not suspend what we know and live in the moment, like children anticipating opening the biggest gift under the tree.

God's love for the world continues to be revealed through the coming of Jesus. It's as if the wrapping paper of the prophets and the scripture is being pulled back to reveal the gift within their pages. Just as we pull back layer after layer of tissue paper to see the gift within the box, we dig down through layer after layer of truth about God who has come to us in the body of a newly born child lying in a feeding box. What marvelous gifts of understanding might we receive as we learn more about him? What gems of wisdom might the Holy Spirit give to us?

In the body of this infant, God comes to us in the weakest and most vulnerable human form so that all people, from the greatest to the least, might know the amazing love of God who has come down and taken on human flesh. What an amazing gift, indeed!

Prayer: We give you thanks, Holy and Almighty God, for the love you show us by giving us the precious gift of your dear Son. May we embrace him as human parents who care for their newborn children, enfolding him into our hearts now and forever. Amen.

The Reverend Phyllis Diamond
Pastor of Moxham Lutheran Church, Johnstown

SATURDAY
December 14

1 Samuel 2:1-8



Scripture reading tells us Hannah was long awaiting for a child to be born. We all know children are God's blessings. God never makes mistakes. Take myself, an only child, married several years ago. I wanted a child badly. I asked many times throughout my life "Why?" I had three children all who died at birth. I had the desire of a mother, the need and want to nurture, and to love a young child.

Isn't it true, one of the main duties of a woman is to produce children? I wanted so much to mother a child, but I have gone through life . . . childless. I served as a big sister through Big Brothers and Big Sisters, worked many years as the Children Youth and Family Ministry Coordinator of Allegheny Synod and always tried going that extra mile for another person's child. I many times still ask "Why?"

Our scripture reading in Samuel tells us after considerable time, Hannah bore a son, she called Samuel. We all have thrown pebbles in a lake.... or released a balloon into the air? Where will either of these land? Like Hannah, we never know the far reaching effect of that pebble or balloon. Nor, do we really know where our daily prayer extends. Hannah was praised for being the "Rock". The Lord is your rock, he is my rock. He will never fail us. He is always with us.

All of us need to remember motherhood is a privilege and a sacred duty. Praise our gracious God for all children both young and old.

Prayer: God we know with you "all things are possible". Keep each of us in your care both morning and night. We all await the birth of our holy son. Love us despite our shortcomings. Lord be with us today and always. All these we ask as well as a multitude of other things in your holy name. Amen.

Margaret (Peggy) Thatcher
Lay Worship Leader, Altoona
Member of Zion Lutheran Church, Petersburg

SUNDAY
December 15

Matthew 24:1-16a



I'm happy to share special memories of the Christmas' I've enjoyed throughout my life. The reason I can't pick out a specific Christmas is that our families have been so blessed throughout the years. We're not any more special than most other families, but the thing we have appreciated throughout the years is that our gatherings are wonderful times of coming together and sharing with each other and best of all free from destroying family dynamics which seem to be prevalent in many families today. Our families have been truly blessed. As a preacher I have come to realize and accept that not everybody experiences the "Ozzie and Harriet" life.

Our family is made up of veterans, artists, businessmen and bankers, homemakers, accountants, bookkeepers, stay-at-home moms, gas station owners, pilots, insurance salesman and many others. We enjoyed our meals together and unwrapped many unique gifts and some really funny ones.

Reading from Is 40:1 "Comfort, O comfort my people says your God". I hope I'm not being too frivolous when I share my all-time favorite gift I received from my childhood years. New flannel pajamas. That's one of my favorite top ten best feelings in life. I couldn't wait to get home on Christmas night and wear them to bed. No thanks Mom they do not need to be washed first. However, we as Christians know the best gift we have received, Jesus, God's only son.

*Prayer: Giving God, help us to never forget to thank you for your gift to us, your Son.
Amen.*

Spence Garvin

Lay Worship Leader

Member of Grace Lutheran Church, State College

MONDAY
December 16

Isaiah 29:17-24



In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll,
and out of gloom and darkness
the eyes of the blind will see.
19 Once more the humble will rejoice in the LORD;
the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.
20 The ruthless will vanish,
the mockers will disappear,
and all who have an eye for evil will be cut down—
21 those who with a word make someone out to be guilty,
who ensnare the defender in court
and with false testimony deprive the innocent of justice

The Christmas Morning of my childhood are truly some of the closest memories I have of things “being perfect”. An early phone call from my uncle would wake up the entire household. His call was a friendly sibling counterattack , stemming from years prior when my mom would wake his children up, just a few short hours after “Santa went to bed for the night.”

I would quickly check the stocking at the bottom of my bed – expecting to find batteries, toothbrush, and socks before scurrying to the living room. I was anticipating many perfectly-wrapped packages adorned with my initials on the tags. Like every child, I was confident that I made Santa’s “nice” list. As I grew older, I began to understand the emotion behind the smile on my mom and grandparents face as they watched me open each gift carefully. At that moment, they felt the world was perfect, too.

In the passage from Isaiah, we get the sense that all of the injustice in the world will be made right. Those who find themselves having differences in opinions will come to a common understanding and the world, too, will be made perfect. As we anticipate the coming of the Christ Child, let us take a moment to put aside all of our differences and cherish the moments when the world appears to be perfect.

Prayer: Let us pray. Gracious God, you call from gloom of life to experience those perfect moments of joy, peace, and bliss. May each of us find those moments this Christmas as we hold the gift of Christ in our hearts. Amen.

Rachel D. Wachter, NHA, CDP
Administrator at The Lutheran Home in Hollidaysburg
Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries
Member of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Altoona

TUESDAY
December 17



Ezekiel 47:1-12

At times it seems as though, if there is a catastrophe out there, it is ME who will find it. Does this mindset sound familiar? It is one I have worked hard to keep away from my spirit, however it still find its way to me sometimes. When reflecting on the book of Ezekiel I was reminded of this: no matter what discouraging events take place, hope is not lost from us.

Ezekiel's story is a clear demonstration that God will never abandon his people. Too often this is easy to forget. Especially when one tries to imagine the state Israel was in when the temple was destroyed and the city had fallen. Many surely asked, "is God done with us?" I know I would have. The loneliness and desolation had to be devastating and horribly frightening, but God never turned his back. He was simply not finished. This was not the end and there was STILL a future.

There was that water. The water seen running from the temple and flowing from the city into the driest, most barren desert. An area that slowly started to show signs of beauty and life, all because of God's presence. There is no doubt that God always has a plan. He is there EVEN when we think we've seen the worst of the worst. God is ready to show us the possibilities of what is yet to come if we stay faithful and remember to never lose hope.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, it is true-we don't know what is coming next. We don't have a crystal ball to show us what the future holds. Please keep us connected to your holy spirit and remind us that this river of life may bring us endless opportunities of things more beautiful than what we have ever seen before. We trust you to guide us in your light of hope. Amen.

Nichole Walker

Administrator at The Oaks at Pleasant Gap

Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

Member of St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Pleasant Gap

WEDNESDAY
December 18

Zechariah 8:1-17



Zechariah says, “The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.” This may not seem like much. I can understand how one could skip over it and focus on the bigger things he talks about. But opening presents and being able to play speaks of so much more. Not the opening of presents but feeling safe to sit and play.

In school we practice drills in case of shooters. Youth my age have seen friends die suddenly and violently. Across the world young people live in fear and uncertainty of what each day may bring because it may be their own death. The prophet promises a time of safety and peace where it is safe to just be a kid. Christmas morning has been that for me. A time to marvel at the lights, hear the story of Christ’s birth, and play. If only all children could see this promise fulfilled for them.

Prayer: God, fill my life with peace. Grant me the safety of innocence and childlike wonder. Protect me from the dangers of this world and bring to your kingdom. Amen.

Mr. Daniel Hamer

God and Life Award Candidate

Member of Trinity Lutheran Church, Altoona

THURSDAY
December 19

2 Samuel 7:1-17



This time of year, it seems everyone is making plans. Plans to eat, to decorate, to exchange gifts, to go caroling, to see Christmas lights. Making these plans is akin to making a “to-do” list. To-Do: wrap gifts, send cards, bake cookies, hanging up stockings. I recently saw a holiday checklist that said, “Christmas: Give Presents Be Present.” In making these plans and creating the to-dos that are a part of the holiday season, are we ever really present?

Samuel reminds us that whatever our plans are, God’s plan is greater. Whether we are exchanging cookies or buying gifts, God is with us. He guides our steps, even if things don’t go according to plan. The cookies are flat, the item was sold out, the credit card bill is sky high. Regardless of the plans we make or don’t make, things we do or don’t do, God is in control.

And thank the Lord that God is in control! We can be present in each of our holiday plans, gatherings, and activities, knowing that the plan is far bigger than anything we can imagine. Maybe we have to remake the cookies or make payments on the credit card bill, but we can rest easy knowing that God has wonderful things in store for us. We can truly be present and laugh with family and friends during the get togethers, or truly listen to the words of O Holy Night knowing that God controls all and has set into motion His plan.

This season, I challenge you (and myself!) to be present, regardless of the plans or to-dos. God is here, God is in control, and God is planning something incredible.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank you for this hectic time of year. We have many plans, but please help us to remember that Your plan is the one that matters. Help us to be present this time of year, as we wait for Your greatest present – Your Son Jesus. In his name, Amen.

Megan Will Flower

Attorney and Owner, The Law Office of Megan E. Will

ALSM Board of Trustees

Member of Friedens Lutheran Church, Friedens

FRIDAY
December 20



2 Samuel 7:18-22

I am amazed at how much God gives to each of us. While we do not live in mansions or all drive fancy cars or maybe not even have a car, God is good to us. Each year as Christmas comes I see the expression of joy as people sing. I see the beauty of Christmas lights. I hear the excitement of children talking about presents. But beyond these things, God gives us more.

Though I may not always agree with my parents, I know they love me and are always there for me. They are a gift from God. My friends who support me and encouragement are a gift from God. Even my brother is a gift from God. My cat, who sometimes runs to avoid being held, is a gift from God. And Christmas reminds me that Jesus is a gift from God. David understands that God provides more than wealth. God offers hope, keeps promises, loves unconditionally and forgives us our failings.

This year I hope you see how blessed you are. May your heart be open to see the wonder of God working in the world around us.

Prayer: God, thank you for your blessings in this life. May we realize that everything comes from you. May we hold on to your greatest gift in our hearts, Jesus Christ. Thank you for sending him to love and show us how much you love us all. Amen.

Elaina Hamer

God and Life Candidate

Member of Trinity Lutheran Church, Altoona

SATURDAY
December 21



2 Samuel 7:23-29

And now, LORD God, keep forever the promise you have made concerning your servant and his house." David calls upon God to be faithful to promise. How odd to read this so close to the time we celebrate fulfillment. God promised to make of Abraham a great nation and today the children of God cover the earth. God promised that a descendant of David's would set upon the throne forever. We approach now the time when the king of kings is born and sits on the throne forever. God promised a Messiah would come. In the infant child we proclaim the fulfillment of this promise made to Israel.

The Advent season has built to this rapidly approaching proclamation of a new born king. For us today, the lights, decorations, hymns, and get togethers are all components in the celebration of a kept promise. A Messiah has been born. Forgiveness has been granted. Jesus sits on the throne of David forever. The light of God's love in Christ shines in every candle, light, and heart. We no longer need to ask God to keep promises. They have been kept and are ours to claim through Jesus, the Christ, our Lord.

Prayer: Most merciful and loving God, thanks be to you for fulfilling the promises of old. Bind our hearts in mutual love of you and each other that we may willingly walk in your paths. Bring us all to your kingdom as you fulfill the promise of everlasting life. This we ask in the name of our Lord, Jesus the Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

The Reverend Ralph W. Hamer

Director of Pastoral Care and Congregational Relations

Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

Member of Trinity Lutheran Church, Altoona

SUNDAY
December 22

Matthew 1:18-25



I find remembering harder and harder to do, don't you? I once thought I had a pretty good memory, but I'm not so sure anymore. Maybe it has something to do with the sophistication of contemporary society. Perhaps, it's the myriad of little details which comprise so much of every day. Some say it has something to do with just getting older.

Frankly, I tend to discount this last reason—getting older—because I find that children can't remember either. That's why parents of grade school students often find out about school projects at the very last moment and usually from another parent at the bus stop. "Didn't you hear?" one parent says to another at the bus stop. "Each student in the class is supposed to come in tomorrow with a model medieval village made entirely from typewriter parts." You've noticed, I'm sure, that school projects generally contain an element of inexplicable weirdness. It's probably a form of revenge on the part of teachers, getting even with parents for spending their day in adult company while teachers are stuck in crowded rooms trying to get our children to stop writing their 5's backwards. At any rate, even young people find remembering difficult. Isn't it so?

One of the benefits of the Advent Season is that it helps us to remember. The Old Testament lessons urge us to recall the prophecy of the coming promised Messiah. The Gospel Lessons remind us of the mission of John the Baptist and alerts us to the imminent arrival of the Messiah. All of this is to provoke our memory and to help us remember the significance of the event which takes place on December 25.

To be sure, our society does its part to alert us as to what is coming. Indeed, we've heard for weeks already the lilting tunes of familiar Christmas carols. After a while, however, all of the Christmas hype simply deadens our senses as to the major Christmas event, so that by the time the grand day arrives many are immune to the carols and weary of Christmas specials.

By properly keeping the Advent Season, the Christmas season is much enriched. The enhancement comes by simply following step by step the Advent Season. I am convinced that if we keep Advent reverently, we'll celebrate Christmas joyfully.

So, if you happen to be one of the many who are tired of Christmas before it ever gets here, try observing Advent. Remember the prophecy, recall the words of John the Baptist, and share fully in the watchful preparation and expectation of Advent. You'll

SUNDAY
December 22

Matthew 1:18-25



be glad you did. Isn't it so?

Prayer: Lord our God, allow us to remember your promises to us. Let us not be consumed with fear and business that we forget to stop and hear you speaking the words of promise and hope. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

The Reverend Ralph W. Hamer
Director of Pastoral Care and Congregational Relations
Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries
Member of Trinity Lutheran Church, Altoona

MONDAY
December 23

2 Samuel 7:18, 23-29



“And now, LORD God, keep forever the promise you have made concerning your servant and his house.” David calls upon God to be faithful to promise. How odd to read this so close to the time we celebrate fulfillment. God promised to make of Abraham a great nation and today the children of God cover the earth. God promised that a descendant of David’s would set upon the throne forever. We approach now the time when the king of kings is born and sits on the throne forever. God promised a Messiah would come. In the infant child we proclaim the fulfillment of this promise made to Israel.

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Prayer: Most merciful and loving God, thanks be to you for fulfilling the promises of old. Bind our hearts in mutual love of you and each other that we may willingly walk in your paths. Bring us all to your kingdom as you fulfill the promise of everlasting life. This we ask in the name of our Lord, Jesus the Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

The Reverend Ralph W. Hamer
Director of Pastoral Care and Congregational Relations
Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries
Member of Trinity Lutheran Church, Altoona

TUESDAY
December 24

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)



“But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” (Luke 2:10)

When I think of great joy at this time of year, I can't help but think of Snoopy exuberant dancing during Charlie Brown's Christmas Pageant, or Rudolph's nose brilliantly glowing when asked to guide Santa's sleigh or the gleam of excitement in Ralphie's eyes discovering the hidden present of an official Red Ryder carbine action range model. Those are some joyous memories from my childhood. Obviously I spent a little too much time watching holiday cartoons, yet just thinking about those moments years later always brings a smile to my face.

The reason for my smile is because the joy that those characters exhibit is about hopeful expectations delivered. Snoopy gives in to his passion, Rudolph receives inclusion and welcome on the team, and Ralphie receives his dream present. And isn't that theme what Christmas time is all about - hopeful expectations delivered.

In the scriptures case, the hopeful expectation is about a coming Messiah - a light in the darkness, a symbol of comfort for a weary world. Those are things that we and our world still long for - light, peace, hope, salvation. And the angel's message of good news is exactly that - the Christ child of which the heavens sing proclaims a peoples' expectations delivered.

And because of that good news, now is the time for joy. Although this joy (Christian joy - scriptural joy) doesn't mean in comes happiness and out goes struggle, hurt, and pain. Instead, Christly joy means the promise of a divine presence (in flesh and spirit) to walk with us through those hard and difficult things while pointing to the assurance of a brighter tomorrow - some day, in God's time, but definitely one day. Rejoice my friends. Christ is come again. And that is something to be joyful about. So do your best Snoopy dance, glow like Rudolph's nose, and gleam like Ralphie as you too share the good news. Christ is born. Merry Christmas to all.

Prayer: Let us pray. God made flesh, we welcome you once again to our often dark and

TUESDAY
December 24

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)



dreary world. May your coming ignite joy within us, that we might be moved to sing like the angels, share like the shepherds, and treasure like Mary this hope that has come in to our world - Jesus the Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen."

The Reverend Will Osman

Pastor of St. John Lutheran, Bellefonte

Member of ALSM Congregational Relations Committee

WEDNESDAY
December 25



John 1:1-14

The gospel reading for Christmas day comes from the opening of the gospel of John. If you compare John to the other gospels you will notice that John does something unique in its telling of the story of Jesus. John does not start with our Lord's birth or the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry. John begins 'In the beginning'

The gospel points to Genesis chapter 1 when the Lord God spoke and created all that exists. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (John 1:1). John also tells us that, "the Word became flesh and lived among us." (John 1:14). John is saying that eternal creative Word, that brought all light and life into being, is the one who took on a human body and we know as Jesus. John is telling us God has come to us in Jesus Christ.

It is important for us to recognize that something unique and unprecedented has happened in Jesus. You and I begin our existence when God places us in our mother's womb. Before that we do not exist. But this is not the case with Jesus. Jesus is God who has always existed. He has no beginning and has no end. We begin when we are born into this world. Jesus is the eternal God who took on a human body to walk with us, and to live a life like us, in this world.

So that is not just another baby lying in the hay. God was lying in a manger. In the 4th century, Saint Athanasius wrote in his book *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*, that as the child lay in the manger Jesus was holding all of creation in the palm of his hand. More recently in the 20th century, Bishop Fulton Sheen wrote in his book *The Life of Christ*, "when the child (Jesus) was in her arms, Mary now looked down to Heaven." Both of these authors are trying to help us understand this miraculous, and unique thing that God has done in coming to be with us.

I would invite you to ponder this amazing thing that God has done. In his incarnation, Jesus shows us that we are not alone. Jesus shows us that God will not sit by while we struggle in this world, but God jumps into the mud with us. Jesus takes up the weight and the struggles of a human life. He is betrayed by his friends. He is abandoned by those who claim to love him. He has people lie against him and he is turned over to death. Jesus suffers a terrible death on

WEDNESDAY
December 25



John 1:1-14

the cross. Jesus comes into this world and experiences the worst this world can throw at him.

Yet our Lord does not turn away from us. After all he suffers he does not rise again to bring vengeance and retribution. The Lord Jesus rises from the dead and opens his arms to this world that tried to destroy him. Jesus response to the world trying to destroy him is to rise from the dead and to welcome us into his eternal life. God's response to our evil and our brokenness is love and God's gracious forgiveness.

That is why I rejoice this day. Christmas is the reminder that God has done what we might consider impossible had God not done it. God has taken up residence with us. God has come to bring his life and salvation to us. In Jesus we see the love of God that will not abandon us and will not let us go.

I pray that you will be blessed on this Christmas Day. May you know the presence of our Lord Jesus.

Bishop Michael Rhyne
Allegheny Synod - ELCA
ALSM Board of Trustees
Member of Zion Lutheran Church, Hollidaysburg

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