



2018

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 29

Nehemiah 9:6-15

The time was the fifth century B.C. Artaxerxes ruled the Persian Empire, which included Judea. Nehemiah, a Jew born in Babylon, was probably the king's cup-bearer. Nehemiah heard that the walls and defenses of Jerusalem were in disarray and asked to go back to the ancestral home to rebuild. The emperor granted his request and appointed Nehemiah governor of Judea. The task was accomplished in fifty-two days, but there was also a spiritual rebuilding to accomplish. The people had strayed from the Law of Moses. As with us today, the first step to renewal is confession, and these verses from the Book of Nehemiah record the beginning of that confession—an acknowledgement in very specific, historical terms of God's sovereignty.

As we seek a spiritual renewal at this season of wonder and joy, we, too, may recall the specific history of our faith—the stable, the star, the mission and crucifixion, the victory over death, and the gift of grace. We, too, may acknowledge the infinite love of God, who took human form, a baby born of the Virgin Mary.

Prayer: Dear God, may I never stray from your commandments, but if I do, forgive me, remind me of your sovereignty and love, and lead me in the paths of righteousness. I ask in the name of your blessed son, Jesus Christ, whose birth we now celebrate. Amen.

Dr. Patricia Savage

President & CEO

Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

FRIDAY

November 30

Nehemiah 9:16-25

In 1960, my brother and I asked for a rather expensive Christmas gift we were certain we'd never receive. We really wanted to improve our model train layout by getting a new Santa Fe diesel engine with lighted passenger cars. But even though we were young, we knew this gift would be way too costly for our parents to consider it.

I can remember that Christmas morning like it was yesterday. When we began to rip the wrapping paper off the rather large box that was somewhat hidden in the corner of our living room and saw the words Lionel Trains emblazoned on the side of the box, we were filled with ecstasy.

From that time on, when purchasing a present for my wife, my children, other family members or friends, I have always hoped that the recipient of my gift would feel that same degree of joy that I experienced 58 years ago. And now I better understand what my mom and dad must have been feeling when they had sacrificed so much to make this Christmas dream come true.

Mark Twain was correct when he said: "To get the full value of joy, you must have someone to divide it with."

Throughout this season of Advent, we can heighten our joy as we celebrate our Savior's birth by worshiping with others. Being part of the community of faith should highly-valued and never be taken for granted.

Prayer: Most heavenly Father, we thank you for sending us your son, Jesus, as we prepare to celebrate His birth. We ask you to give us countless opportunities to experience profound joy as we gather with fellow believers in worship both at Christmas and the weeks that follow. Amen.

Mr. Tom Bradley

Member of Trinity Lutheran Church, Altoona

Former Board Chair, ALSM

SATURDAY
December 1

Nehemiah 9:26-31

So often we find ourselves in similar situations to those who were disobedient in our reading from Nehemiah. We come to God for a little while, but then we fall away and are led astray. Perhaps we come back to God and fall away yet again. This cycle can be overwhelming and all consuming. Yet there is joy in this text – there is joy in this history – there is joy in our own faltering. Verse 31 says, “Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.” (NRSV) God is truly gracious and merciful – and this grace and mercy is exemplified in our Christmas Joy. God’s love is poured down and flows into our hearts through our Lord, Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, whose birth we prepare to celebrate. Whether you find yourself feeling separated from God, trust and believe that God is with you, never separated from you and continues to lift you up and surround you with God’s own love.

Prayer: Let us pray. Good and gracious God, thank you for your continued presence in my life, especially when I fall away from you. Help me to come to you with an open heart and mind, to be willing to see your grace and mercy, and recognize your joy coming down. I ask this in Jesus’ name, Amen.

The Reverend Becky Horn

Pastor of St. Luke Lutheran Church, Centre Hall

SUNDAY
December 2
Luke 21:25-36

“There will be signs in the sun, moon and Stars.” “At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

The start of the Advent season puts in front of us passages about the end of history and the coming of the Christ child and the joy of a new age. I immediately think of the song “Joy to the World” and the lyrics, “Joy to the world! The Lord is come! Let earth receive her King; Let every heart prepare Him room, and heaven and nature sing.”

During the Christmas season, it is easy to dream about the coming of our Savior, our Lord, Jesus Christ. It is because of His sacrifice that we are able to sing with such joy. It is this time of the year I believe we need to sing His praises more than any other time of the year. People today lack spiritual joy. Spiritual joy will bring us more happiness than any material item.

Prayer: Lord, help me each day to sing about your spiritual joy, so those who have lost their way may see the joy that comes with the acceptance of Jesus as their king.

Mr. Chris Reighard
Senior Vice President of Finance & Planning
Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

MONDAY
December 3
Numbers 17:1-11

I love to get out in the woods and hike. So every once in a while I get the urge to make a new walking stick. Best of all, I never have to buy wood or search for just the right piece of lumber. Instead, God directs my eyes to a downed limb. A little imagination, some cutting and trimming, a lot of sanding, and a bit of urethane is all it takes to transform a dead piece of wood into a lovely hiking companion. Those sticks are small, but meaningful reminders that God provides for our needs, and often in ways that involve breathing new life into things the world gives up for dead.

Moses and his leaders experienced something similar in our reading from Numbers. Uncertainty plagued the Israelites. Who was God's authentic spokesperson? Who had authority to lead, guide, and direct the people as they made their way through the wilderness? The people could not agree. And so God provided an answer through wooden staffs. Aaron's staff sprouted, put forth buds, produced blossoms, and bore ripe almonds, indicating that he was the one God had chosen. How else could live almonds be produced by a dead stick, but through God's miraculous intervention?

Perhaps this Advent you are feeling about as worthless as a downed tree limb. Maybe you sense an emptiness in your heart, and a lack of purpose and meaning in your life. Advent is a season of waiting, hope, and the anticipation of miracles. And so it is a perfect time to take your concerns and questions to God. I can't promise that you'll receive exactly the answer you desire, but you will receive the answer that you need. And though that answer might not come to you on your timetable, it will come in God's time. God loves you, God hears you, and God will answer you. Eventually, you will feel something new and beautiful blooming in you. Indeed, God will grant you clarity and equip you for your next journey. So embrace that joyful opportunity! And consider taking along a nice walking stick. God will provide that as well!

Prayer: Lord God, just as you provided direction and guidance to the Israelites, I pray that you would provide direction and guidance to me. Help me to identify my gifts. Bless me to recognize the things I should drop, as well as the things I should seize hold of, and soften my heart to surrender to your wise and loving will. Use me to be a blessing to this world, and in doing so, bless me to bloom. In your holy name I pray. Amen.

The Reverend Scott E. Schul
Pastor of Grace Lutheran Church, State College
Congregational Relations Advisory Committee, ALSM

TUESDAY
December 4
2 Samuel 7:18-29

Christmas is a time of joy and celebration for my family. For years, my family has been blessed with family and friends coming together at my parents' home for Christmas Eve celebrations. My husband and I would travel to the area to enjoy the holidays. When we would arrive the table was always filled with goodies, snacks, cheese fondue, and homemade Christmas cookies among the favorites. The anticipation of the sugar cookies decorated with all kinds of sprinkles and lots of icing would help pass the time on the long trip home. The sugar cookies were made by my sister and decorated with the assistance of my father, who found joy in decorating the cookies and taking advantage of eating the mistakes! My husband loves the pineapple and apricot filled kolachky cookies my mother makes which were top of his wish list each year. They reminded him of the cookies his grandmother used to make. At the end of the evening everyone would leave with a container filled with their favorites. I enjoyed freezing a container of the sugar cookies to enjoy throughout the winter. I would take a cookie out one at a time to make the joy last just a little while longer. The memories over the years of who ate the most, how long did the cookies last, and what special decorations we would see the next year will stay with me forever.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the daily gifts and Christmas traditions that bring us joy.

Mrs. Brenda Blough

Administrator

The Lutheran Home at Johnstown

Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

WEDNESDAY
December 5

Isaiah 1:24-30

It is only briefly into Advent and I am sure many of us are already feeling the “Christmas Wrath.” The feeling where there are too many “to-do’s” and not enough time to do them. Others may be experiencing a different kind of wrath. The feeling where something is off this year but you can’t place your finger on it or it may be the realization this Christmas will be different than the rest. It might be different because family or friends have moved away, the loss of a loved one, or even the drastic change in one’s life which was not of your choosing.

With this time of the year, we are told to be happy, full of joy, and to be with good cheer. Sometimes that is difficult because we feel there are numerous things bearing down on us and we wish for some sign or some acknowledgement of hope in our lives. When I consider where many of us are in our lives, how the world looks drastically different than before, or how the Israelites continuously had empire after empire bear down on them, I hear how “Zion shall be redeemed.” No matter what happens, I continue to be reminded how much God loves us. As we consider the wildness of our lives and especially the whirlwind in preparing for Christmas, I hear how God redeems us. This is the focus of what Christmas means. Even though God could have started the world over, in many different ways, God still believed in humanity. God believed in humanity so much that we get to experience God’s love in the form of Jesus. Whether you find God’s comfort through Jesus as the baby in a manger or the Jesus who is risen from the dead, know God’s love redeems us every day. May you live into God’s love and redemption every day.

Prayer: God of redeeming, you remind us daily how your love has no bounds. Continue to remind us as we begin to be even more caught up in the busyness of the holiday season how your love is there. May your love be experienced by those who are struggling with love, comfort those who struggle, and bring us all a sense of your peace as we move closer to the manger. We ask this in your son’s name. Amen.

The Reverend Drew McCaffery

Pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church, Altoona

Congregational Relations Advisory Committee, ALSM

THURSDAY
December 6

Malachi 3:5-12

Oh the Joys of Christmas! For most, Christmas IS the most joyous time of year – for others, it can be a difficult time...

On December 25, 1956, my parents were blessed with a baby boy – how wonderful to have a child born on the same day as Jesus! That baby boy would be the oldest of four children and I had a big brother who happened to be born on Christmas Day! Our family was blessed with celebrating two Christmas birthdays – Jesus and my brother – how special! Christmas has always been a joyous time, with family, friends, church choir, candle-light Christmas Eve services, the giving and receiving of gifts, love and laughter. Even as my parents have aged and we kids have grown and have our own families, celebrating the joy of the Christmas season remained a family affair – it just became larger! However, this year will be different...my Christmas birthday brother passed away earlier in the year and it will be our family's first Christmas NOT celebrating two Christmas birthdays. While Christmas has always been joyous, I plan to focus this Christmas on the memories of Christmas' past - to remember and be grateful for the joys of the season and the gift of my brother and Jesus. While our celebrating will have a different feel for sure, I am thankful for the gift of life everlasting even if the time on earth is limited. We will be rejoicing in Gods' love and feel the presence of my brother with us.

Prayer: "Lord, as we enter the Christmas season, we want to take time to thank you for sending your son to be born as a baby and to become our Savior so that He can bring peace into our hearts and joy to those that find their hope in Him.

Lord, we know that only in Him is true peace and lasting joy to be found; and as we sing the Christmas carols and choruses this Christmas season we pray that true joy would come into the world this season and that many would find their peace. Amen."
- Author Unknown.

Mrs. Becky Young
Vice President of Human Resources
Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

FRIDAY
December 7

Malachi 3:13-18

One of the reasons I love the season of Advent is because our lives are turned to focus on what is to come. The scripture readings, the hymns, our prayers, and the special use of light in our worship all point to the great day when God will act and bring all things into unity. My demeanor changes when I read, sing, pray, and worship with others during Advent. There is a palpable hope, a turning toward joy that lifts my heart and brings me joy in the presence of other watching and waiting people.

There is yet another side to the season of Advent, not in how we observe it, but in the external realities around us. The daylight is minimal. The cold permeates our bones. It is easy for me to lose my hopeful focus and submit to the dreariness of daily life, especially when I face challenges at home or at work. There are days, I confess, when I wonder what good it will do me to pray or sing or make connections with other people. There are days when it seems vain to serve God.

Yet, I am reminded in this season that that great day of God's merciful justice is not so far off. Advent is not just about looking for promise in the distant future. Advent encourages us—or perhaps, we encourage one another in Advent—to keep watch for God breaking into this gloomy world right now. Every day brings new opportunities to find hope that dissolves our despair, to practice righteousness with our neighbors instead of isolating ourselves, to look for the light of Christ to dispel the shadows that weigh us down. Advent helps me to remember that we are indeed God's children, and for those who have been claimed by God in Christ, hope is ever with us.

Prayer: Let us pray. Holy One, ever-near, when we become discouraged and find it difficult to see you, stir our hearts and fill our lives with your hope. Enlighten us with this gift to become more aware of your presence and more eager to share the hope and light that we receive in you, through Christ our Savior. Amen.

The Reverend Kevin Schock

Pastor of St. Mark Evangelical Lutheran Church, Pleasant Gap

Chaplain at The Oaks at Pleasant Gap, ALSM

Congregational Relations Advisory Committee, ALSM

SATURDAY
December 8

Malachi 4:1-6

This lesson might seem to be a bit difficult to relate to joy, when we hear that “the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.”

But then we hear; “But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”

So what is it that we should do? Rejoice that the wicked will be burned or leap for joy because we who are righteous will do okay. This might seem like a tough choice, and in today’s world we might feel pulled between speaking out against the wicked and looking for joy in the world.

Maybe these words from Malachi can be a strong reminder that all is not perfect, that at times we struggle to find joy in a world that seems so chaotic, so full of anger, but, and this is an all important but, we are not alone. The people in Malachi’s time were reminded that they would be sent the prophet Elijah, who will bring families together and help heal the people.

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, the birth of the Christ child, we too are reminded, joyfully, that we have been sent a Savior who will be with us even in the tough times.

So may we all jump for joy, may we all go “leaping out like calves from the stall,” knowing that the Lord leaps with us, guides us, and gives us strength to face whatever this world throws at us.

Prayer: Let us pray; gracious and loving Father, we thank you for the joy that you bring to our lives, even when the world around us seems joyless. We find joy in you, in serving one another, in caring for our families, and in caring for your creation. We thank you for the greatest joy we have ever received, the birth of your son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

The Reverend Sharon Erb

Pastor of First English Lutheran Church, Tyrone

SUNDAY
December 9

Luke 3:1-6

The scripture tells us that John the Baptist was preparing the way for all to God as John preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John quotes Isaiah, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation.' What we are being told is to make a clear path for God to fill us and forgive us. This scripture is important at this time of year to reflect upon the trials that often get in the way of the clear path to God. The hustle and bustle of our lives can often cause the straight road to salvation to become a crooked, rough road. Let us reflect on our path this Advent season and remember no matter the trials that often distract us, we all need to prepare our own path for God's salvation. May we all turn closer to God as we serve in a ministry of love, compassion, and mercy in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Prayer: God in Heaven, may the joy of Christmas live within me this day and each day. May I become a light to others that they may know love, compassion, and hope through you. Amen.

Mr. Jeremy Schrader
Administrator
The Lutheran Home at Hollidaysburg
Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

MONDAY
December 10

Isaiah 40:1-11

I'm sure we can all think of times in our lives when we've felt as though we've been swallowed up with stress, worry, and trouble. We are all guilty of allowing problems to sometimes consume us so much, that we start to lose sight of our faith. During these times, we find people waiting in the corner, sharing inspirational phrases like, "don't worry, everything will be ok," and "this too shall pass," or "give it to God and let it go." These calming phrases are spoken as though we are supposed to instantly smile pretty and put on our best smiley face. It doesn't work that way though; does it?

While these angelic souls come to us with the best intentions to help us feel less worried, we still cringe with fear that things will NOT be ok. Or that it will NOT pass this time.

The truth is, those messengers are right. Their words are correct and deep down we know it too. A negative attitude of 'gloom and doom' is not how we should approach difficult circumstances. As a matter of fact, the harder the situation we are facing, the greater the message we can learn. Our duty is to simply LISTEN.

Listen to our heart and to what the spirit is telling us. The strength to overcome whatever God has placed before us, is within us. Our responsibility is to remember we are never alone. He is always walking beside us, even when the process seems too slow. We need to have faith that He will never abandon us, not even during the darkest of our journeys.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I know you are always nearby, waiting patiently for us to reach out to you. No matter what the struggle may be or how far we travel away from your glory, you are protecting us. Please remind us to silence our minds more often than we do, so we will hear you speak to our tattered souls. Help us to restore the strength inside of us and provide us with the grace and joy we need to ensure we can climb every mountain we encounter, in all the days ahead. In your name we pray, Amen.

Mrs. Nicole Walker

Administrator

The Oaks at Pleasant Gap

Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

TUESDAY
December 11

Isaiah 19:18-25

In this passage from Isaiah, we read that both Egypt and Assyria will join Israel in worshipping the Lord who will bless all the nations. This is a surprising claim considering that the Egyptians and the Assyrians were bitter enemies of Israel, symbols of the enslavement and subjugation of God's people. Yet, we hear the promise that the Lord will make himself known to these neighbors of Israel and that all three will one day stand together.

The psalmist reminds us how good it is when families live together in unity (133.1). What gives us cause for joy in these words of Isaiah is the promise that God will expand the "family" to include those who once were considered enemies. In our own time, we are all too familiar with the fear, hatred, and violence that result from division; it seems that what defines too many communities is a sense that they have enemies. We fail to live into God's desired unity as long as the human family draws lines between nationalities, races, religions, genders, political parties...the list goes on.

As we look forward to Christmas, as we pray for peace on earth, we give thanks that God came to dwell among us, loving the whole world, erasing the lines that divide us, and teaching us to call no one an enemy. If God can heal the deepest hurts between Israel and her enemies, surely there is hope for us as well. With joy we prepare for the Advent of our God and the day when we fully realize that "our God" truly means "the God of all people" with no exceptions.

Prayer: Good and gracious God, in this season of hope and anticipation, allow us to look with confidence toward that day when the hurt and distrust that too often divide the human family will be replaced with forgiveness, grace, love, and unity. May your Spirit continue to work in us to make us agents of your peace that our hope may not be in vain. Amen.

The Reverend Traci Bowman
Pastor of Saint Matthew Lutheran Church, Martinsburg

WEDNESDAY
December 12

Isaiah 35:3-7

He will come and save you. Faith. It isn't always easy. There are days where we may feel that we are lacking in faith. That we are on this journey alone. Never fear, He will come and save you. He knows our adversities. Today may be a challenge, tomorrow may be, too. However, there is good to come. It may not occur in our time, but in His time, if we believe.

BELIEVE. It is the theme of my children's favorite Christmas movie, The Polar Express. Having faith in the unseen. The joy felt in anticipation of Christmas. In their young worlds, it is also the joy of Santa's pending arrival. The joy of waking each morning as we get closer to Christmas morning, searching for their beloved "Elf on the Shelf," Magic. I find joy each day in my children. I love watching their delight when the lights are hung, the tree is decorated, the cookies are baking and all of the holiday traditions they look forward to. The excitement in the house can be measured by the noise, with many deafening days, especially the last few before Christmas. These little boys know that Jesus is the reason we are celebrating, and anxiously wait to light the candles on the Advent wreath before dinner. They get ready for bed, offer their prayers, and say goodnight to their friend, Magic. Watching them grow in both faith and excitement for Christmas morning is perhaps the greatest joy for any parent.

Prayer: Dear God, please help us to keep the hope and joy that this holy season creates in our minds and hearts throughout the entire year especially during the trying days. He will come and save you. Amen.

Mrs. Andrea Schurr
Director of Mission Advancement
Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

THURSDAY
December 13

Amos 6:1-8

In this passage, we hear God (who is Love) express frustration with those who claim to be God's people, but who are not living in God's ways (caring for the poor, loving their neighbor, loving God). Instead, these people have no eyes except for themselves and their own comfort.

It is not that resting and having possessions are bad in and of themselves; instead it is the arrogant and apathetic attitude with which these people focus on themselves and neglect to see or acknowledge the tragedy around them. The city is lying in ruins all around, and yet they seem to have no compassion for others, concern for their community, or a sense of loss that they are no longer living in God's ways. These people are more concerned with eating feasts, having luxury belongings and accommodations, and wheedling away their time on nothing, but relaxing and personal (mindless?) entertainment.

During Advent, we are called to "prepare" for the Lord. Part of the preparation of Advent is to "wake up" to hear God's call, to see the others around us, and actually take part in the healing of the world, rather than be dismissive of its violence and injustice. This is hard to focus on, when what we'd prefer to do is set aside the realities of the suffering world in order to have a happy holiday. It is also difficult not to focus on acquiring more luxuries, when retailers all around us at this time of year would have us believe that we need to buy more for our children, grandchildren, and other family members (to give them the Christmas they really want), and maybe even buy a few things for ourselves while we are out (because don't we really deserve it after all that hard work of shopping?). But how might God feel about these things, when we are more worried about our entertainment and creature-comforts than we are about God's children around us who are in the ruin of poverty, violence, food insecurity, and fear?

While this is a challenge to consider (Amos does not exactly present a 'happy' Advent text) and even harder to do, it is hopeful for the world, in that we can be reminded of what God's priorities are, and become part of God's work to make things more as God wants them to be.

The child who comes to the manger, and who grows up to go to

THURSDAY
December 13

the cross, shows us how our lives are to be lived for others, rather than just for ourselves. This Advent, may the Holy Spirit move in our hearts to help us not just prepare for one day of celebration, but help us be about the work of preparing for God's coming kingdom, in which love, grace, and plenty is available to all, instead of just a few.

Prayer: God of grace and compassion, you have given to us so lovingly - including the gift of yourself, in Jesus Christ. Forgive us when we become distracted by the world's priorities and focus on acquiring more for only ourselves and the people closest to us. Work in our hearts that we might see - and attend to - those who are experiencing "ruin" in their lives. Move us out of our own comforts in order to be used as your vessels of hope and mercy. Give us courage to give in ways that really matter, and to prepare for your coming by living out your ways of sacrificial love. We ask this through Christ our Lord, Amen.

The Reverend Elisa Osman

**Member of St. John's Lutheran Church, Bellefonte
Chaplain at The Oaks at Pleasant Gap
Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries**

FRIDAY
December 14

Amos 8:4-12

In Germany, there is a Christmas tradition that has been lost to many in the United States. It is the coming of the fearful Krampus. This horned, devil-like creature comes in the evening of December 5th. His mission is to punish bad children by swatting them and taking them to the underworld. No child was safe from the Krampus who was known for bad behavior. The passage for today from Amos sounds similar. God is sending punishment upon those who value profit over the welfare of others. Judgement comes upon those who can't wait for religious observances to end to return to making profit. It is clear that those who follow a path in pursuit of wealth over all else will not escape God's righteous judgement.

If this was all of the story, we would be left without much joy. However, December 6th in Germany is St. Nicholas Day. Children wake early to see if St. Nicholas left them a present as a reward. From the fear of the night comes the light of day and the anticipation of good things to come. For Israel the judgement upon the wayward was balanced by the lifting up and preservation of the faithful. Those who lived in faith did not need to fear God.

While most of us no longer fear the Krampus, we do know what it is like to fear the darkness that overshadows life and the trepidation of the unknown. Yet Christmas Day reminds us there is something good waiting for us. In the midst of the day's business and celebration, we lift up the reassurance of God love and mercy. Jesus the Christ has been born and the darkness of life is gone. He shines as a beacon of shelter and a light to guide our lives in the path of faith.

Prayer: Holy God, thanks be to you for freeing us from fear. May we see your son always before us calling us to the shelter of your loving arms. In Christ's precious name we pray. Amen.

Mrs. April Lauver
Director of Nursing
The Lutheran Home at Hollidaysburg
Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

SATURDAY
December 15

Amos 9:8-15

Do you ever have dry spells? You know, those periods in life where it seems that nothing you do has any effect on your situation in life...where no matter how much encouragement you receive from others, the good stuff never comes to you. It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that God is done with you, that you are no longer seen by God, and that your prayers seem to fall on deaf ears. Months and even years go by when it seems as if your life is in ruins.

But you have not been erased from God's holy agenda. Time after time God promised Israel that "the time is surely coming" when all will be righted. Yes, waiting for that day is not easy, but God is turning the world around and the first shall be last and the last shall be first. God is faithfully restoring and remodeling the ruins of your life and the time will come when that which was destroyed will be rebuilt and improved. If God promised Israel that they would be planted upon their land and never again removed might He also restore the fortunes of all God's children? God is faithful and so I believe that the days are coming when no one will be without and the mountains will drip with sweet wine and the gardens will provide enough food to fill the bellies of every person in every nation. The time is surely coming!

Prayer: Gracious God, send forth your Spirit to renew and refresh us when we thirst for hope and meaning in our life. Give us patience as we wait for your word to speak to us and guide our footsteps into pleasant and fruitful gardens. Fill us with good things even during the fallow seasons. Amen.

The Reverend Jean Caudill
Ordained Supply Pastor, Allegheny Synod

SUNDAY
December 16

Luke 3:7-18

It seems so long ago that I was sitting in the basement of my home parish of Trinity Lutheran Johnstown making gifts out of felt, glue, and colorful adornments. We made everything from Rudolph nose bowties to candy wreaths for the homebound. This annual event was called the Advent Workshop. It provided an opportunity to come together as a faith community in service to others. For the children, it was an opportunity to make gifts for family members. There was a sense of pride in giving something made from my own to hands.

Looking around today, it seems it more about buying than creating. Find the latest electronic, the hottest novelty item, or a gift to outdo last year's gift. Somewhere, in the midst of price tags and brand names, we have lost that simple joy of a gift from the heart that comes with a part of us. In the gospel reading, John warns against the pursuit of financial gain at the cost of others. How different would Christmas be if we focused on the simpler gifts of time, love, and mercy? How different would Christmas morning be with the gift of a poem or drawing from a child rather than an item we will replace in a few months?

I do not know what gifts await me this year from my children. But I know that I will treasure them as I do the hand decorated heart-shaped box from my daughter and the monkey powder from my son. They are a piece of them that I will cherish. They are one of my Christmas joys.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, quiet the day and the fast pace of life. Grant us time to be with one another. Teach us how to give the gifts that do not tarnish nor rust. As you gave Christ to us, let us give ourselves to one another. Amen.

The Reverend Ralph Hamer
Director of Pastoral Care and Congregational Relations
Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

MONDAY
December 17

Numbers 16:1-19

When you read the designated text, I will assume that, like me, you will ask, 'what does this have to do with Christmas Joy and the Advent season into which we have traversed halfway?'. I struggled in the task of finding that nugget in the text, the silver lining of the clouds that are currently pouring water down once again. The text is one which causes more concern about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob than it lifts up a God of mercy and loving kindness. My take away is that God has placed us into a world in which we ourselves have requested to be led. Moses is chosen by God to lead the people and Aaron is set apart as Moses' right hand. As we live with the significances of our midterm elections, let us trust in God's providence and God's insight. This is part of the Christmas Joy. Had we been in charge of the arbitration over the sins of humankind, we would have surely messed it all up. God steps forward, as usual, and takes the situation in hand, coming as the Christ child. The incarnation provides us with the joy of seeing God's chosen as the means to live in the ways of God. That is of course, as long as we understand that it is God's will that will be done. Let me conclude with Luther's pulpit prayer, and even though you may not be a member of clergy, please hear your calling as a disciple and minister of Christ with a calling to lead as we pray these words.

Prayer: Oh, Lord God, thou hast made me a pastor and teacher in the church. Thou seest how unfit I am to administer rightly this great and responsible office, and had I been without thy aid and counsel I would surely have ruined it all long ago. Therefore, do I invoke thee. How gladly do I desire to yield and consecrate my heart and mouth to this ministry! I desire to teach the congregation. I too desire ever to learn and keep thy word my constant companion and to meditate thereupon earnestly. Use me as thy instrument in thy service. Only do not thou forsake me, for if I am left to myself, I will certainly bring it all to destruction. Amen.

The Reverend Robert Way

Pastor of Saint John Lutheran Church, Clearfield

Congregational Relations Advisory Committee, ALSM

TUESDAY
December 18

Numbers 16:20-35

It is easy to see that God is not happy in today's reading. God tells Moses and Aaron to move away from those who have made Him angry. He means to move away - to step back away from them so that they will not be punished with those who have made Him angry. Once Moses and Aaron tell the people to separate and all are clear of them, the ground opens up and swallows them. Not much joy for them.

So where is the joy? God called others away. Every day, God calls us away from the things that could harm us and hurt others. His voice is heard through teachers and parents. His voice is heard in Jesus who reminds us that God is not just about anger, but about love. He loves us so He calls us to him.

My Christmas joy is my family who always shows me God's love. Not that my sister and I don't fight. We do. Not that I don't make my parents frustrated. I do. But just as God does not give up on me, neither does my family. Christmas is a time during which we can all be together and be reminded of God's love that will keep us together through everything.

Prayer: God, thank you for loving us and calling us away from danger. Keep us all safe from harm and teach us to be the people that you want us to be. Amen.

Mr. Daniel Hamer

Member of Trinity Lutheran Church, Altoona

Boy Scout Troop 117 God and Life Candidate

WEDNESDAY
December 19

Micah 4:8-13

Right now, I'd venture to guess many of you are experiencing the stress that is only associated with the holidays. Layaway payments, credit card payments, last minute gifts, endless parties where each should receive a hostess gift – it's overwhelming. The holidays are full of joy from seeing friends and family and celebrating the miracle that is Christmas. Sometimes, that joy is overshadowed by the stress and anxiety from all of the “stuff” and “to-do” this time of year.

Wouldn't it help if we knew God's plan? If God could just tell us that the layaway bill will be paid in full by December 20 thanks to an unexpected Christmas bonus, maybe some of this stress would be lightened. If God could show us that everything really is “calm and bright” as the song says, maybe we would quit worrying. But that's not how God works.

He reveals little of His plan to us, with the hope that we would rely on Him and trust that there is and will be “peace on earth and mercy mild.” From Micah's reading today, we know this of His plan: He's coming. We are to wait and keep watch because He will come to grant peace and mercy to those who need it. He will make this world “calm and bright” with the peace sought so much this time of year. He's coming. Let us keep watch.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, through this busy time of year, I often forget that your plan is what matters. My payment plan and my holiday party schedule pale in comparison to your plan. Help me to remember and trust that there will be peace on earth, things will be calm and bright, and that you're coming. For this, help me keep watch. Amen.

Mrs. Megan Will

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

ALSM Board Member

THURSDAY
December 20

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Bible verses like the one above are a great source of joy in my life. But, as with much of scripture, the book of Jeremiah is not easily summarized by a single verse, a passage, or a chapter for that matter. Knowing the “big story” makes our favorite verses all the more powerful.

God sent Jeremiah as a prophet to speak to the people of Israel in the midst of destruction and despair. Jeremiah speaks to his people about what God has in store for them, “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jer. 31:31). God’s new covenant will look like this: God’s law will be in their hearts. God will be the only leader that they need. All will know God because God remembers them all. (Jer. 31:33-34).

Those are God’s promises to me and you. In the midst of the destruction in our lives, in our families, in our communities, in our nation, and in God’s entire world; God makes a covenant with us, promising that God’s words of love, peace, hope, and joy are written on our hearts forever.

Prayer: Let us pray, God of promise, be with us now, so close to the night of your son’s birth. Help us endure the darkness and cling to Christ as our only source of hope and joy. Amen.

The Reverend Karen Ward

Pastor of Saint John’s Lutheran Church, Sinking Valley

FRIDAY
December 21

Isaiah 42:10-18

“Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise to the ends of the earth.” - Isaiah 42:10

Why a new song? Singing is a natural part, even essential part, of this season of Advent, of Christmas (just days away), and of the holidays. But as it often the case, we'd rather sing the oldies and the goodies - be they traditional hymns or classic Christmas carols - than croon some modern canticle; we prefer the well-known to the new. They bring comfort and familiarity. Yet here Isaiah exclaims, Sing to the Lord a new song!

So, why a new song? What's different now? Well according to the promises of Advent (angel Gabriel's message, Mary's Magnificat, and Zecahriah's canticle)- everything. Everything is different now. Why? Because the promised Messiah is coming, God's chosen one is on the way and everything that's wrong will be righted, everything that's dark will be lightened, and everything that's rough will be smoothed. The servant is coming, Emmanuel is coming and that changes everything! And that deserves a new song.

This deserves a song that looks forward to the great reversal; a song that sings of peace not war, of love not hate, of welcome not rejection, of comfort not suffering, and of hope not despair. This is the promise of God and this promise (in the form of Isaiah's suffering Servant, in the form of Christ, and later in the form of Christ's church) is about to break loose in our world. The best possible response to this promise is to break out in song.

Have you ever seen what happens after a Penn State home victory? The whole team and the coach gather in the end zone and sing the school's alma mater to the crowd. Triumph engenders joy which elicits song. And yes the coming of Christ should elicit joy. But the promise of Advent is about so much more than triumph; it is about God entering into our darkness, our suffering, our hurt, and being with us. Sometimes that presence brings a cure, sometimes not, but God walks with us none the less and stays with us.

And what God's presence does bring is hope and wellness - a sense of peace and wholeness in spite of suffering. Our world is still broken. Our world is still hurting. Our world still rejects more than it welcomes. But every now and then, God's kingdom peeks in, breaks through to show us the possibilities of God's shalom even in our

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imperfect state. And this is why we should sing.

In his book, *Psalms of the Heart*, George Sweeting wrote about two missionaries who went to work among the Chol Indians of Southern Mexico. Sweeting reports that they rode mules and traveled by dugout canoes to reach this tribe. They labored 25 years with other missionaries to translate the New Testament into the language of the Chol Indians. Today the Chol Church is thriving. More than 12,000 Christians make up the Chol Christian community. What's interesting is that when the missionaries came, the Chol Indians didn't know how to sing. With the coming of the gospel, however, the believers in the tribe became known as "the singers". Sweeting writes: "They love to sing now, because they have something to sing about."

Sing to the Lord a new song indeed. Advent is our time to remember that we too have something to sing about, despite the darkness, the headlines, the negativity. We have God. We have the Spirit. We have the Christ. And we have the church. And together, God uses all of us to bring glimpses of the kingdom into our world. And that is more than enough reason for us to raise a loud shout with psalms, to sing a new song. Thanks be to God.

Prayer: God of Advent, come. Come and be with us. Come and walk with us. Come and show us - how to have faith in age of doubt, how to be still in age of busyness, how to be a neighbor in a time of enmity. Come into our days of discord and enlighten us with the love of Christ so that your promise of presence and new life might put a spring in our step and a song in our hearts. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

The Reverend Will Osman

Pastor of Saint John's Lutheran Church, Bellefonte

Congregational Relations Advisory Committee, ALSM

SATURDAY
December 22

Isaiah 66:7-11

During this Advent season, it is important to remember the joy of the season. It is time for us to think back on all of our happiest times. As you reflect during Advent remember the family members who are no longer with us and the happy times, they gave us. Spending time with your family will provide many happy memories.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we turn to you during this Advent season and pray that you would bring joy and healing to us. Let someone bring joy to our lives during this Advent season. May the hand of Christ make us feel joyful at remembering his birth. In the name of the Lord. Amen.

Mr. Aaron Saylor

Member of Evangelical Lutheran Church, Duncansville

Boy Scout Troop 49 God and Life Awardee

SUNDAY
December 23

Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

“... for the Mighty One has done great things for me. . .” declares Mary. But is this not true for each of us? Has not God done great things for each of us? Within two days we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the divine incarnate. God takes on human flesh and dwells among us as the promises of old are fulfilled. The Savior has come! The King is born! The “word”, the logos, the created life now comes to redeem creation!

Under the ribbons, bows, string, lights, food, and festivities is the reality that the world has been forever changed. We have become empowered to live as children of God free from bondage. We are unchained from hate to be able to love. The shackles of egotism are broken that we may can reach out to help the other, the least among us, the widow and the orphan. What joy it is to know that we can live in freedom to love others as God loves us. Whatever our differences may have been we can set them aside to find the unity that comes through God and know reconciliation. May each of us come to know the lasting joy that is Jesus and all that He gives that cannot be wrapped and decorated.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, open our hearts and eyes to see you. Let us not be blinded by what glitters. May we seek Jesus who dispels the darkness by his own radiant light. Amen.

The Reverend Ralph Hamer
Director of Pastoral Care and Congregational Relations
Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries

MONDAY
December 24

Luke 2:1-14

Ah, the details of Luke's birth narrative! Where would we be without it? Before our selection here, I ask you to recall earlier in the story wherein the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she is not only favored, but that her son's name was to be "He saves", Yeshua, Jesus. He was the one promised of old, the Messiah of the Lord. Our text goes on to tell us that Mary treasured all the words that the shepherds came in haste to share. With no midwife to take and wrap the baby for her, she does this herself, and lays the child not in the comfort of a crib, but in a trough. Now she hears the story of the angelic visit to the shepherds and the multitude of heavenly host praising God. What would we have been thinking were we Mary? Is it possible? After all this pregnancy was impossible! What was to become of her and her newborn? You and I know the rest of the story! We praise God for the rest of the story. I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. Good news-Great Joy. When I became a father, I could not restrain myself from sharing that good news, that great joy. On this, the holy night of our Lord Jesus' birth, are we somber and restrained, tired from all the preparations for the holidays? Are we like the innkeeper who was oblivious to that great joy? I pray that as you read this devotional - the Holy Spirit of God fills you with wonder, and awe, with unbelievable peace and comfort, with expressible, great joy. Expressible! Sing Hosanna, sing Alleulia. For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given. Let us ponder and treasure that good news, but let's not keep it to ourselves. We are a multitude of heavenly host, a little lower than the angels, but with good news to share.

Prayer: Holy God, Almighty Lord, Gracious Savior, loosen our tongues that we may like the angel Gabriel and like the multitude of the heavenly host, who joined in praising God. Remove the negative thoughts that often prevail within our minds and our hearts. Fill us with the joy of the incarnation, the joy of the life of Christ, the joy of the resurrection to eternal life. Guide us as we consider Your great love for us. Upon hearing your voice may we, like Mary, embrace your will and become a dwelling fit for your word, Jesus Christ. Join our voices with all creation, that we may sing your glory on high. Give us a place with the shepherds, who hastened to be witnesses to and find the one for whom we have waited, your word made flesh, who lives and reigns still with us here, but also at the Father's right hand in unity with the Holy Spirit, God forever. Amen.

The Reverend Robert Way

Pastor of Saint John Lutheran Church, Clearfield

Congregational Relations Advisory Committee, ALSM

TUESDAY
December 25

Jeremiah 31:31-34

May God be with you and bless you this Christmas Day. On Christmas Eve, we celebrated the birth of the baby Jesus and turned our focus to the baby who was placed in the manger. The gospel reading reminds us of the child born in Bethlehem, the song of the angels, and the poor shepherds who are invited to meet the Savior and Redeemer of the world. The service is a blessed reminder that hope has come into the world in Jesus Christ. We see the baby laid in these meek and lowly circumstances to remind us that the Lord has come for all people. Salvation for all of the world came in Jesus Christ. I pray Christmas Eve was a blessing to you.

On Christmas Day, we continue to celebrate our Lord coming into the world, but we hear from the gospel of John. St. John does not begin the story of Jesus with the birth in Bethlehem. St. John's gospel begins Jesus' story in the beginning or with the beginning of all things. We hear that Jesus is the eternal word of God. That is, when God spoke creation into being, it was God's creative power and God's word that went forth and brought all life and light into being. John is telling us that Jesus' existence did not start in His mother's womb. Jesus is what happened when the eternal God, the eternal power of God who existed before creation, the one who is the second person of the Holy Trinity, took on a human body and became flesh and lived among us.

John is helping us to understand that in Jesus we meet someone and something that has never happened before. The great and mighty God, who brought all things into being and who holds all of creation in the palm of his hand (even the little hand that was lying in the manger), took on a human body and came to live in this world with us.

It is important to realize that the eternal God is the one who came. Jesus is the one who is with God and was God. He existed before anything was made and before anything was created. It was just that when this eternal one took on a human body and lived among us - we called Him Jesus.

The gospel also tells us that our Lord Jesus came into this world for the purpose of bringing his light and his life to all people. You know that there is darkness and brokenness in the world. We know that we are not always the

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December 25

people that God wants us to be. We know that in our sin and brokenness, or in the sin and brokenness of the world, people suffer. However, in Jesus we see that suffering, death, brokenness and evil – these dark things of the world – do not have the last word.

God's light has come in Jesus. God's way and truth and hope is found in Christ our Savior. That Lord is the one who has claimed you in baptism and promises to be with you always until the end of the age. That Jesus is the one who has already defeated sin and death. That Jesus is the one who is the living embodiment of a better way.

Christ is with us. The God who is more powerful than the darkness is here. He promises to never let you go and be with you 'always, to the end of the age' (Matt. 28:20). The light has come in Jesus Christ, and He is with you. The living God who has already defeated sin, death, and the devil is with you. Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is working in you and on you and through you. Jesus is at work in you and in this world, pushing back against the darkness. God who made heaven and earth is with you. God is here in Jesus Christ. Death's days are numbered. Sin will one day fall. The darkness is giving way to Jesus own brilliant light. Jesus Christ, the living God, is here. May you know His presence. May you know that the one true God is with you.

Merry Christmas!

Prayer: Gracious Jesus, we thank you for the gift of your life. We thank you that you have come into the world to save us from sin, death, and destruction. As we travel into these 12 Days of Christmas, may we know your presence with us. Keep us under your wings. Hold us in the palm of your hand. All this we pray in your most holy name. Amen.

Bishop Michael Rhyne
Allegheny Synod - ELCA
ALSM Board Member

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