

Peace
for the

Broken



Peace *for the* **BROKEN**

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December 3rd—December 9th
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December 31st—January 6th

Advent Meditation

For use individually or as a family. (If using an Advent wreath, light the appropriate candles)

Comfort, comfort my people says your God. (Isaiah 40)

Speak tenderly (speak of peace) to Jerusalem

Say to those with fearful hearts- Be strong, do not fear (Isaiah 35)

Your God will come, he will come to save you

A virgin will be with child and give birth to a son, (Isaiah 7)

And will call him Immanuel.

Read the day's devotion and prayer.

(Optional—After the prayer at the end of the devotion, have everyone share a short special prayer—thanking God for something, asking God for help or healing for someone, or a simple word of praise that the Lord comes to save you!)

Complete the day's "Activity." Then read the closing prayer and blessing:

Support us, Lord, all the day long, until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over, and our work done; then Lord, in your mercy, give us safe lodging, a holy rest and peace at the last.

Amen.

May our Lord Jesus come quickly by his grace, with his power, in his glory.

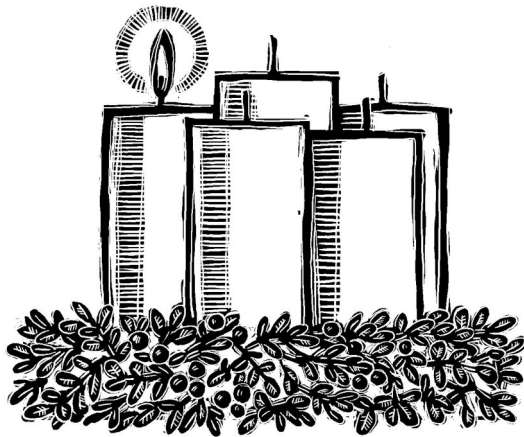
Amen.

OTHER DEVOTION OPTIONS:

- Sing a verse or two of your favorite Advent or Christmas hymn during your devotion time (perhaps at the beginning or as a closing)
- If you have children, seek to include them in the devotion—have a child read the Bible passage or the closing prayer.
- In your prayers, include the weekly advent prayer listed at the beginning of each week. Or use Luther's Morning / Evening Prayer as a closing prayer after the blessing.

Peace
for those

BROKEN BY REGRET



FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Protect us by your strength and save us from the threatening dangers of our sins; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

When I was younger, one of my favorite games to play was Milton Bradley's *Memory*. I grew up with three older brothers, and there was no chance they would let me win with games like *Candy Land* or *Chutes and Ladders*. Luckily, *Memory* was one of those games where I knew I had a chance. I would methodically study the position of the cards, and thankfully my spatial memory worked to my advantage in this game. The game of *Memory* is one of those games where short-term memory pays off.

Having a strong short-term is not always beneficial, though. A college student server in a restaurant may be able to remember exact orders and modifications for a party of eight, but she may not want to remember the shame associated with her last party. A high school student may be able to memorize facts and dates for his upcoming History test, but he may not want to remember the guilt associated with the history on his internet browser. Our sins cause shame, and they cause guilt. They cause feelings of worthlessness and regret.

Of all people who could have a strong short-term and long-term memory, God would be highest on that list. We know God is omniscient, he is all-knowing. The Psalmist says he can perceive our thoughts from afar. Before a word is on our lips, he knows it completely. We have nowhere to hide from his knowledge, even though we often try.

But God is a God of compassion, love, and forgiveness. He is a God of undeserved grace and mercy. He has every right to condemn us to an eternity of pain and suffering in hell, yet he chose to send his Son into the world as our substitute, to suffer the pain we should suffer, and to die the death we deserve. Because of what Jesus has done for us, the words in our text ring true. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." Our God who knows all chooses to forget our wickedness, to cast our sins away since they were paid for in full. We are no longer bound by our regret, and God restores our broken spirits.

Prayer: Merciful Father, we thank you for your love and compassion. We know we deserve your punishment because of our daily sins and struggles of the flesh, but you do not disown us. You bring us back into your presence and make us whole again. Continue to be with us and to bless us in our struggle against our old Adam, and make us strong to do your will. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Activity: Use a sheet of white paper or cardstock to create your own Bible Memory game. For the younger crowd, write a promise from God on one card and draw a picture to match it on the other. For the wiser crowd, match promises from God with passages from Scripture.

I'm not a very big fan of doing laundry, and even more so when there are stains to deal with. I've seen the commercials for products like *OxiClean* and *Shout* stain removers, and have even made use of the *Tide to-go Pen* on more than one occasion. But from experience, I can say that it is almost impossible to completely remove some stains. Grass stains leave a hint of green residue, grape juice and wine stains leave traces of purple, and spaghetti sauce stains are unmistakably difficult to treat.

Our text for today paints a similar picture. Isaiah calls our sins like scarlet and red as crimson. There is no way I would bother to try to treat a white shirt where the entire fabric was basically dyed deep red. I might get a one-square-inch section to somewhat resemble a shade of white again, but I would likely discard the garment. Later in Isaiah, he refers to even our righteous acts as filthy rags. With that reality, what hope is left?

I had the privilege to contribute to the writing of a song about baptism, and I want to share some of the lyrics with you now, as I believe they accurately describe our reaction to our sinful stains. "Shameful I scour my sinful soul; stains will remain nonetheless. But if you say you won't notice the dirt for I'll be dressed in your righteousness, then I'll say: What can stand in the way of my being baptized if all of it is done by you? It's your hand in the water that washes my life and makes it new."

The truth of the matter is we can try and try to scrub away the dirt and the shame from our sins, but if it were up to us, the stains will remain. It is God who covers us in Jesus's righteousness and erases our sins. Our text reminds us, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." What a comfort to know that it does not depend on us, and that our sins have been removed from us as high as the heavens are above the earth, and as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12). God doesn't look at us in disgust and discard us, but he restores us and removes our regret.

Prayer: Lord, we know that we are broken and in need of restoration. Thank you for sending your Son to be our substitute. Help us to live our lives renewed in confidence that our sins have been forgiven and that you have covered us in the righteousness of Jesus. In his name we pray, Amen.

Activity: As a reminder of our Baptisms and renewal in Christ, read through the rite of Holy Baptism on pages 12-14 of *Christian Worship*.

John 8:11

Forbes Magazine ran an article a few years ago titled *The 25 Biggest Regrets In Life. What Are Yours?* Some of the regrets listed off were things like: *Getting involved with the wrong group of friends when I was younger. ...Not having the courage to get up and talk at a funeral or important event. ...Not taking care of my health when I had the chance.*

If you were interviewed and a list of your regrets were published in Forbes or on Facebook for the world to see, what would your list look like? Fighting with your spouse or sibling? Talking badly about your co-workers or classmates? Spending too much time on the i-Pad, i-Phone, Droid and too little time with your child? Spending more and saving less instead of spending less and saving more?

Imagine for a moment what it must have been like when this woman's secret, shameful, sinful lifestyle was publicized. Can you fathom the fear as she is brought to Jesus? Can you imagine the glares she received as the religious leaders pointed out her illicit behavior? Can you picture her face turning red and her hands covering her face in shame?

Isn't very hard to picture her shame, is it? You've felt that same rush of embarrassment and wishing you could hide away where no one could find you too, haven't you? Your own, "Oh I wish I wouldn't have done that" situations, and "If I could do that over I wouldn't have said that" kind of mistakes too, right? Regret after regret after regret. You know them. If that's not bad enough, your Savior knows them, all too.

And what did he do with them? He didn't raise an accusing finger but took upon himself all of the accusations. He didn't hide from your sin. He took it upon himself. He didn't walk away from you, but walked to the cross for you. That place where every single one of your regrets was removed. He doesn't condemn you, but was condemned for you. Why? So that you could *"Go now... Go now in the peace and forgiveness he was born to bring. Go now in thankfulness of his life full of no regrets for you. Go now in joyfulness because he gave his life that you would be set free from the guilt of your regrets. Go now and leave your life of sin."*

Forbes magazine can produce their lists of regrets. You may have a list of regrets, but God has removed them because he didn't regret sending his Son for you. That's something he never regrets because he wants you to be with him forever.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for coming into this world to pay for my sin. Fill me with your forgiveness and empower me to leave my life of sin that I may always live for you. Amen.

Activity: Give a piece of paper to everyone at the table and have each person write down one thing they regret from the past day. Have the head of the household collect them all...read them aloud...and announce to everyone, *Jesus has forgiven you of your sin.*

"Forget about it!" Has someone ever said that to you? Maybe you missed a free throw in the basketball game and you can't stop thinking about how you let your team down. Your piano piece you played at the piano recital wasn't played perfectly like when you practiced at home. You can't stop thinking about that one chord that messed you up. Your report card wasn't that great and now you're worried about the status of that college scholarship. Sometimes we dwell on those things that aren't all that significant and someone tells us, *Forget about it.*

But then there are those things we've done that gnaw at our conscience. They make our palms sweaty or our knees shake if we dwell on it. Our heart races if we think about it too long. And try as we might, the more we think about it the harder it is to forget about it. Maybe it was that impatience that turned to an angry outburst toward our spouse that left the night ruined. Maybe it was that email you fired off or text message you sent in the heat of the moment that has resulted in silence from your relative. Maybe it was the time we decided to talk back to our parents and we ruined the family night. *"Forget about it?"* Our conscience won't let us. The glare from our spouse or the silence from our friend or the coldness of the air are a constant reminder we did wrong. How can we not dwell on it?

Regrets... we all have them. But what is more effective than dwelling on them and lamenting them is to take them to someone who can actually do something about them. In a few weeks you're going to peer again into a mirror from the past. You're going to call to mind why he came and what he did. Remember that baby was born not for those who are 'good' or on the 'nice list', but those who lament their past. Those whose guilt lingers and whose conscience continues to convict them. The baby Jesus came so God could intentionally forget your past. Your sins are not recorded. He gave his life so we can move from lingering and lamenting to learning and living.

Learn again why he came to dwell on this earth for you. Learn again what his life meant for you and gives you. If the God of perfect memory can intentionally forget my sins due to Christ's sacrifice, there is reason to believe I can also – not just by putting them out of my mind – but by replacing the wrongs I've done with Christ and the right he has done for me, in my place. Our eyes don't have to glance back, but can confidently look ahead in the forgiveness this child was born to bring us.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, when the past haunts me and I dwell on my sins, focus my eyes on your life and death that has forgiven and erased them. Amen.

Activity: Write down on a piece of paper the sin(s) that still nag you... then identify in Christ's life how he actively did what you failed to do. When your failures bother you, focus your thoughts on Christ and how he succeeded, fulfilling for you where you failed.

Advent season means preparation! Christmas is in eighteen days. Will I finish my Christmas to-do list? As much as the world flaunts the joy of Christmas, in reality, this is one of the most stressful times of the year.

Because of that stress, many people, Christians included, search for peace. The Holy Spirit's words through King David in Psalm 32 assist us in our peace. Much of the stress of preparing for Christmas involves seeing family – the brother in law who always gets on my nerves; my parent who constantly criticizes; my child who doesn't seem to care if he comes or doesn't come. The stress also occurs over those we won't see this Christmas – my loved one who passed away, and I never apologized to them! Christmas joy can easily ruin itself over Christmas regrets – the “woulda, coulda, shoulda's” of our life. “If only I would have held my tongue ...” “I could have stopped this if ...” “I should have spoken up sooner!”

The Holy Spirit reminds us of the blessings that belong to us because we have a God who forgives. We are blessed; joy is ours because of the forgiveness our God offers through Jesus.

King David knew a little about forgiveness. He knew the joy of hearing the words “The LORD has taken away your sin!” His transgressions were forgiven. His sins were covered. Why? Because **the LORD** did not count his sin against him. Forgiveness is not something that originates with us. Forgiveness is not something that originates with the other person. Forgiveness originates, and is completed with the LORD. The blood of Jesus, poured out as our guilt offering on the cross, is what paid the full price for every sin, ours included.

Do you have Christmas regrets? Take them first to the cross of Jesus. Hear the words that the LORD spoke to David through his pastor, Nathan – “The LORD has taken away your sin.” With forgiveness in hand, go into this Christmas season confident and joyful. Celebrate the Savior who came into the world with you in mind. The baby Jesus who looks up from the manger is looking at you. He entered this sin-filled world with your name carved into his hand. He wants you to be blessed, joyful, and have peace!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I have regrets for things I have done and failed to do. Give me your peace this Christmas, and remind me that forgiveness comes from you. Amen.

Activity: Share memories of Christmas, good and bad. Remind each other of the love and forgiveness Jesus came to bring.

Picture yourself as King David. The LORD has blessed you. He placed the kingdom of Israel in your hands. He gave you victory in every battle you fought. He promised to send the Savior through your family! He gave you trust in him as your Savior. His grace to you is overwhelming!

But look at what you've done. You seduced another man's wife. You got her pregnant. You killed her husband in battle to cover up your sin. You put all this in the back of your mind and put on your benevolent king face. You comforted the widow by taking her into your home as your wife. All is fine. No one will find out. You can still be the hero.

Or can you? David put on his "normal" face, but things weren't normal. As long as he kept silence about his dirty deeds, they ate away at him. He could still distinguish between right and wrong, but the regret of what he did plagued him. His Spirit-guided conscience was still active, even if it was in the background.

Guilt and regret are two qualities the world does not esteem. It weighs me down. It keeps me from enjoying life. True! David did not enjoy life while he was carrying the burden of what he did. The heavy hand of God's law to convict the heart is a necessary part of our lives. *"Through the law we become conscious of sin."* (Rom.3) All strength in myself has to be dried up. The 'break' must come before the healing can begin.

Sin doesn't go away by trying harder tomorrow. It doesn't get canceled when I do something good. It can only be removed by death. Jesus' cross is the sacrificial death that defeated sin, once and for all. Only there will we find God's heavy hand removed, and strength and joy returning. With the burden removed by Jesus, we are free to serve God and each other, even after the sins that plague us and hurt others. That is good news of great joy for all people, yourself included!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for the heavy hand of your law. I don't like hearing that my sins earn me hell, but I need to be broken, so I can be refreshed with Jesus' forgiveness. Break me each day, so that I always treasure your forgiveness and love. Amen.

Activity: Make a private list of any sin or sins you are still carrying as a burden. Turn them over to Jesus' cross. Burn the list. They are gone forever!

“I am sorry!” “It was my fault!” “I take the blame!” Many people choke on those words. I often tell people: “There are three important phrases to remember in your life. Say them regularly to those around you. 1. I love you. 2. I am sorry. 3. I forgive you. Keep those phrases in your regular conversations, and you will be blessed.”

Why is it so hard for me to say, “I am sorry?” I don't like being wrong. Saying ‘sorry’ makes me vulnerable. I may not trust that the person will forgive me.

The Bible uses a statement to describe King David that may sound unbelievable after what we read yesterday. The Bible calls David “A man after God's own heart.” How can that be? Look what he did! Adultery, lying, deception, murder!!! David was a broken man. But he also trusted his Savior God. When his Pastor called him to confession and said, “YOU ARE THE MAN,” David immediately, penitently, and humbly replied, “I have sinned against the LORD.”

Why was David so ready to confess? He knew who his God was. He knew and trusted that the LORD was *the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.*

Knowing who this Savior God is, and trusting his qualities is essential in my day to day relationship with him. I can willingly lay my sins before Jesus, because I know he will be there each time with the forgiveness he has already placed in my account.

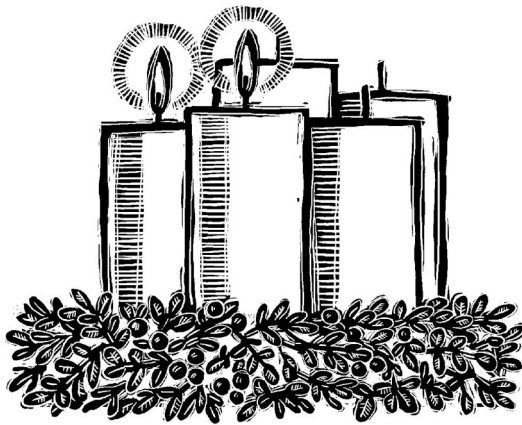
The readiness of my God to forgive not only makes it is easier to confess. It also makes me more determined to stay away from those sins that plague me each day. The heart of Jesus to forgive will also lead me to be more willing to forgive others when they sin against me, and encourage others to forgive me when I sin against them. That gives me peace and joy, not only as I prepare for Christmas. It gives me peace and joy for eternity!

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for being so willing to forgive. Thank you for sending Jesus to be my sin, and for giving me his righteousness. With Jesus, I have no regrets! Amen.

Activity: Gather your family to discuss the importance of the three-word phrases. Build on your trust with each other by committing to use them each day. After one week, gather again to discuss the changes you see.

Peace
for those

BROKEN BY FEAR



Second Week of Advent

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Walking alone through a dark alley in a bad part of town would be pretty terrifying to most people. With no one to watch your back, you would probably feel very discouraged. However, if you walked through that same dark alley with a Navy SEAL team surrounding you, you would probably feel very safe, protected on all sides by those elite soldiers. A dark alley can feel terrifying, or it can feel safe. . . it all depends on who is with you.

Joshua had every reason to be terrified and discouraged as he and the Israelites entered the promised land. Their great leader, Moses, was gone. The land of Canaan was filled with enemy nations that would oppose the Israelites every step of the way. Joshua easily could have trembled in fear as he thought about what lay ahead.

But Joshua didn't need to be afraid. He could enter the promised land full of strength and courage, because he was not entering that land alone. The Lord his God was going with him. And sure enough, God proved he was with Joshua when the walls of Jericho fell at nothing but the sound of trumpets. God proved he was with Joshua when the sun stood still over a battlefield. God proved he was with Joshua when the list of defeated kings totaled thirty-one. God said he would be with Joshua wherever he went, and God kept that promise.

God will also keep that promise to you. God has gone to great lengths to prove that he is with you. He sent his Son, Jesus, to take on human flesh and win salvation for you. Before he ascended, Jesus reminded all of us, "Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age." In your baptism, God poured his Holy Spirit out on you. In Communion, Jesus gives you his body and blood to assure you that his forgiveness is with you. Christ lives in you, and he will never leave you nor forsake you.

You won't always have a Navy SEAL team following you, but you have something better: God is with you wherever you go. Whether you are entering the hospital for treatment, beginning a new job, having a child, or sharing your faith with a friend, God goes with you. You can be strong and courageous no matter where life leads you. Have no fear! No matter what scary dark alleys of life you walk down, your God is by your side.

Prayer: Dear Lord, be with us wherever we go on the path of this life. Give us strength and courage to face each day, knowing you are by our side. Amen.

Activity: Write "God is with me" on the top of a sticky note. Underneath, write all the places you will be going tomorrow. Put the note on your fridge or door so you remember God will be with you wherever you go.

Long distance relationships are tough. No matter how in love two people might be, there are still many obstacles in making that love last. The physical distance means they won't be able to see each other in person very often. If they're in different time zones, even calling or video chatting can be difficult to coordinate. They may put their future plans on hold until the time of separation is over. Perhaps their love will even fade over the long distance. A lot of things can get in the way.

A lot of things can get in the way of our relationship with God, too. Our love and devotion to God dwindles at times. We may get so wrapped up in the daily grind that we forget to spend a few moments with God in his Word. We may worry so much about the future that we forget to thank God for the blessings of the past. We may spend more time loving our many material possessions than showing love to the God who gave them to us. Even the devil and his demons are constantly trying to pull our attention away from God, so that we focus more on ourselves.

Even though our love for God isn't perfect, his love for us is perfect. Nothing gets in the way of God's love for us. We never have to be afraid that God will stop loving us. His love for us was shown most of all in Jesus. Jesus' death proves that God has forgiven you for all the times you let other things get in your way of loving him. Jesus' resurrection proves God loves you so much that he will raise you from the dead to be with him in heaven.

The many distractions of life do not distract God from loving you. The unknown changes of the future will not change how much God loves you. The devil and all his demons can't stand between you and God's love. Earthly authorities could take everything you have but they can't take away God's love from you. Nothing in the entire universe can crowd out God's love for you. Even death itself, which separates us from our loved ones, can't separate us from the God – in fact, it brings us to his side in heaven.

Couples who date over long distance might be scared that their love will die. But you need have no such fear because there is no distance, no obstacle, and no situation that will sever the love God has for you in Christ Jesus.

Prayer: Merciful Lord, your love knows no bounds. Thank you for giving us Jesus to assure us that your love is abiding and sincere. Let your inseparable love lead us to thank you daily. Amen.

Activity: List some of the things going on in your life that have you worried or stressed right now. Now read Romans 8:38, 39 and insert those things on your list into the verse.

If you've ever been to Europe, you've probably seen a castle. You typically can't miss them. They're huge fortresses, usually built on the high ground of a hill or cliff. They're made of sturdy material. They're impressive and they look completely impregnable. A fortress like this is one of the safest places to hide. But you know what's even safer than holing up in a fortress? Holing up in a fortress in broad daylight. In daylight, a fortress on the hill has an excellent view of everything happening around it. It's impossible for an enemy to sneak up and scale the wall without being seen. A fortress on a hill in broad daylight is one of the safest places you can possibly be.

In Psalm 27, the Lord is identified as both a light and a stronghold. Thus, there is no safer place to be than in the protection of our mighty Lord. No matter what the devil or the world throw at us, we can stand firm in the Lord's protection. At those times when your sins cause you to feel like you're in a dark place or when persecution leaves you feeling unprotected and beat down, just remember where you already are. The Lord isn't hiding from you. He is already wrapped around you, protecting you like a stronghold and bringing the light of salvation to your aching heart.

God is not just a fortress that stands still and waits for us to come to him. He is our salvation that comes to us, to lead the way with his light and protect us with his strong walls. God proved he is our light when he gave us Jesus to be the light of the world (John 8:12). God proved he is our stronghold by protecting us from the consequences of our own sin through the forgiveness Jesus won for us on the cross.

God is your light and your salvation. He is the stronghold of your life. Enjoy living in that bright fortress on the hill. God is your protection; have no fear!

Prayer: Almighty Lord, you protect us from the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. Thank you for being our light and our stronghold. Help us put our trust in you. Amen.

Activity: Do an image search online of a "castle on a hill." As you look at the amazing pictures, remind yourself that God is surrounding you with his protection just like that castle protects the people inside it.

While this time of year is filled with anticipation and excitement, it can also be a time of anxiety and fear. There are so many things we need to do: buy Christmas presents, put up decorations, bake goodies, go to parties, coordinate travel plans. . . .the list goes on and on. We grow concerned about family finances and spending money we don't have. We grow anxious about spending Christmas with relatives who don't get along, or sad because this year there is an empty spot at the table where a loved one used to sit. These fears and anxieties are exhausting and overwhelming. They darken our holiday spirit and threaten to leave us in a state of depression. A time that should be filled with joy and excitement becomes one of dread and fear.

What an invitation Peter offers to us: "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." The one thing you don't have to be anxious about at this time of year is where you stand with almighty God. You can have peace and joy because you know that God sent Jesus into this world at Christmas to rescue you from your sins, and secure for you the certainty of life in heaven. All the wrong that you have done is forgiven because of Jesus our Savior. Through faith, we stand before God covered in his perfect righteousness.

The same God who cared so much for our spiritual needs also cares for us as we face all the challenges of life. In these times of fear, he invites us to cast our anxieties on him with the full confidence that he not only cares for us but will act to take care of us. The same God who worked to rescue us from our sins will work through his Word to remove our fears and anxieties and replace them with the peace and joy of his loving care. Despite the busy-ness of this season, take some quiet time with your Lord in prayer to lay your anxieties on him. Be confident he will hear you and answer you. Then go to his Word and let God bring you his peace and joy as he reminds you of his love in sending Jesus to be your Savior.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, during this busy time, we lay our anxieties and fears on you confident that you care for us. Keep our eyes focused on your love in Jesus and bring us the peace and joy you offer through his sacrifice. Amen.

Activity: Take a moment for each family member to share a fear or anxiety that is weighing on their heart. For each fear or anxiety, come up with a Bible passage in which God speaks to that fear/anxiety, or promises his love and care to overcome it.

“Come to balance” is a football phrase. Before a defender tries to tackle the ball carrier, he needs to come to balance. That means he needs to get his feet under him, his hips settled, and his balance centered so he can react to any sudden moves by the ball carrier and make the tackle.

How easy it is for our lives to get out of balance, especially in this season of spending. This time of year, we have more people and things calling for our money than we have money to spend. Gifts for family and friends, money that we feel obligated to donate for parties or fundraisers. . . soon we fear that the January credit card statement will be more than what we can pay. We feel the pressure to match our neighbors’ elaborate yard decorations. We feel the pressure to provide the perfect Christmas meal for our family along with all the snacks and beverages throughout the day. The kids need new Christmas clothes as well as the costumes for their school Christmas pageant. We are pulled in every direction at once, and all too quickly we find ourselves out of balance.

We need to come to balance. The author of Hebrews helps us do this. He offers us a warning against the love of money, along with the encouragement to be content with what God has given to us. Then he reminds us *why* we can be content and balanced, even during this busy season. God promised to never leave us or forsake us. God kept this promise, first and foremost, by sending Jesus to this world to be our Savior. God didn’t forsake us in our sin or leave us alone – he sent his own Son to pay the price we deserve for our sin. Jesus never let himself get out of balance during his time on this earth. Despite the troubles around him, he remained focused on his mission to rescue us from our sin.

As you feel pulled in so many directions, take some time to come to balance this Christmas by focusing on God’s promise of love and care. Content in God’s provision and secure in his care, we can continue on the path to heaven unafraid and fully balanced.

Prayer: Gracious Savior and Lord, bring us back to balance by reminding us of your love for us. Help us to navigate the challenges of this season content in your care. Remove our fears as we continue our walk toward heaven, confident that you go with us every step of the way.

Activity: This time of year there are so many charities requesting donations and help. We can be pulled in many directions wanting to try to help them all. Discuss all the different charities that you could support, and pick one to support as a family as a way to express your thanks to God for all that he has given you in Jesus.

In his book, “A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23” W. Phillip Keller shares the experiences of shepherds and how it helps relate to why God calls himself our Shepherd (cf. Ezek. 34; Jn 10; 1 Pet. 5:4). In one chapter, he explains that sheep cannot eat or sleep unless they know their shepherd is near. In order to soothe these anxious animals, the shepherd needs to know the quirks of each unique sheep. Unless the sheep hear him, see him, and perhaps even feel his reassuring touch, they will neglect food and sleep – the basic necessities of life.

Sometimes, like sheep, we become paralyzed. When a loved one dies, family members have to be reminded to eat and drink and rest. When you lose your job, you stay up all night worrying how your family will make ends meet. And even if we’re not completely paralyzed, we still experience fear that robs us of the joy that comes from knowing God’s design for our life. Stress and anxiety lead us to focus on the size of our fear instead of the great strength of our Father. Worry affects not just our physical well-being, but our spiritual well-being too. Peace, purpose, and contentment are easily lost.

That is why God makes very clear that he understands each one of us, with our unique quirks and characteristics. He knows that we are like sheep. We are a little flock that seems small compared to the big problems of this world and the overpowering obstacles in life. Yet, notice his promise. He calls himself “your Father.” He isn’t distant from you; he is with you. You belong to him. And he has given his eternal kingdom to you. You belong. You don’t have to wonder if he is someone else’s Father... and that you are on the outside. He changed your status from sinner to saint, from stray sheep to member of his eternal flock. The Good Shepherd changes your status when he laid down his life for the sheep. Because of his great love for us, we who were outside his flock have now become his very own.

So have no fear, little flock – neither you nor the other believers around you. The kingdom is yours. The shepherd-like voice of our Father still speaks through his Word so that we know that he is always here, forever near.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, continue to shepherd us through this life so that, regardless of what might threaten us, we will fearlessly follow you.

Activity: Read through Psalm 23. Identify all the ways that the Lord, our Shepherd, leads us away from fear.

Have you ever seen the show called “Fear Factor?” In this show, contestants move through three stages, each containing something that they and most people fear. For example, one stage may involve eating some kind of gross insect or animal part, like a Madagascar hissing cockroach or raw pig intestines. (Hopefully you are reading this devotion long after dinner.) Another stage may involve contestants being locked in a small, dark place with snakes. Why would anyone willingly put themselves through these things? How can a show like this exist in the first place? The answer is lots and lots of prize money.

Prizes—especially the most valuable ones—come at a cost. Sometimes the cost is worth it. Sometimes it is not.

There is one prize that is greater than any other. Jesus reveals to John that this prize is the “crown of life.” This is not some shiny trinket that promises riches or strength or power in this world. It’s the promise of eternal life that will never perish, spoil, or fade. Life in God’s presence is the full realization of all of God’s promises. The voice of every prophet who foretold the coming Savior . . . the voice of every parable that depicted the kingdom of God . . . the cross, the empty tomb, the ascension, Jesus sitting in his coming kingdom . . . think of every gospel promise God has ever made to his people, coming to complete fulfillment right before your eyes while the songs of angels fill your ears. Can all of this possibly be for you?! Yes! Your Savior has prepared the crown, and all that comes with it, for you: his beloved child. Does that sound worth it?

Our lives will hopefully not contain many Madagascar hissing cockroaches or creepy snakes in claustrophobia-inducing chambers, but life has plenty of other fears. Guilt afflicts our conscience. Calamity in the world brings worry. And death is always looming. In addition, faithfulness to God’s Word is not compatible with all that surrounds us in life. Many times our faithfulness looks more like feeble fumbling than strong strides. But the one who promises us the crown of life is also faithful to his promises to strengthen us, and to guide us on the path that leads to our heavenly home. All his promises are fulfilled in Christ – every last one. The final promise we wait to see is the end, which will bring about the beginning of eternal joys in heaven. There we will receive the crown of life.

And it will absolutely be worth it.

Prayer: Lord of heaven and earth, focus our faith on your eternal promises as we live our lives for you. Amen.

Activity: Read together or sing the words of “O Jesus Christ, Your Manger Is” (CW 40, st. 5)

The world may hold Her wealth in gold
But you, my heart, keep Christ as your true treasure.
To him hold fast Until at last
A crown is yours and honor in full measure.

Peace
for those

BROKEN BY REJECTION



THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

Hear our prayers, Lord Jesus Christ, and come with the good news of your mighty deliverance. Drive the darkness from our hearts and fill us with your light; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Intention matters, and when we are talking about rejection, it matters even more.

Your PE teacher is splitting the class into teams. You're the last one put on a team. Why? Is it because she thinks you're the worst, or is it because she's using you to help out the weaker team? Intention matters.

Your boss asks everyone but you to step into her office. Why? Are you getting in trouble or are you getting a surprise party? Intention matters.

The world around you doesn't understand your faith, your selflessness, or your God. The people who are consumed by a worldly focus, being naturally selfish, do not trust you to be selfless, and so the world rejects you. Their intention matters.

There is a difference between the rejection that comes from the world and the rejection that comes from the evil one. It's all wrapped up in the intention. Both of them hurt, both are challenges Christians have to deal with, and both affect our mission in Christ. But the rejection from the world is forgivable - even understandable. The rejection from the devil? It's unforgivable and irrational.

Christ shows that he understands the difference intention makes as he prays for you in John 17. "The world has hated them..." because "They are not of the world..." and yet he says "I have sent them into the world."

When you suffer rejection on account of your connection to Christ, guard your reaction. First, find encouragement and self-worth in the fact that you are being rejected by something because of a connection to something else, and that the something you are connected to (God through his Word and Sacraments) is infinitely more satisfying than anything that could reject you. After you've found hope and comfort in God's gracious acceptance, consider your rejecter. Discover their intentions.

You've been sent out into the world that has rejected you - Christ wants to be as connected to those of the world as he is to you. You are given the tools and the love needed to facilitate that connection. When you are rejected, accept! Accept the person who has been coerced by the lies of the devil and show them the love of Christ.

Prayer: Christ, we would be nothing and nowhere if not for your desire to be with us and have us be with you. Help us to find our full worth and satisfaction in your acceptance, and teach us to generously and ambitiously share this hope to the world around us, even and especially when we face rejection at their hands. Help us love our enemies as we pray for those who persecute us. Amen.

Activity: Fill in the blanks of this verse: _____ them by the _____, your _____ is _____. (John 17:17) Identify 3 people or categories or people that reject Christians/God in the world today. Pray out loud and together the words of this verse, replacing the "them" with the individuals/groups you've identified.

1 John 3:1

Have you ever read or heard something that you absolutely disagreed with - so much that you were even a little upset about it? (I'm talking about the kind of thing that sticks in your head so much you almost end up muttering like a frustrated old curmudgeon shuffling down the sidewalk.) Have you ever, after reading or hearing this, pursued the topic with some research and careful, objective discussion only to discover that the issue at hand is more nuanced than you'd realized? Seeing the bigger picture, gaining a little perspective, and acknowledging legitimacy on all sides of an argument can be illuminating. It always helps.

There's an increasing muttering of frustration in the church. I hear it often. Christian people are asking questions like:

“How can we stop the world from getting worse and worse at every turn?”

“How can we preach the gospel when the right to do so seems so constantly under attack?”

“How are we supposed to get them to listen to us when they hate us?”

People who ask questions like these are sincerely concerned for those who, if they were to die right now, would go to hell. Sometimes, though, in weakness, fear, doubt, and the midst of change, these questions come from a more selfish place. People don't like to be uncomfortable or challenged, and when the things you believe are condemned by the culture around you, it is uncomfortable and challenging.

The solution is in front of us. John explains it in 1 John 3. When the world is rejecting the things Christians say and do, it is uncomfortable for us - but the solution is not to be louder and force them to get to know us and the things we say and do. The solution, instead, is to introduce them to the one for whom we do those things.

“The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.”

God loves unconditionally, cares eternally, and makes lives better. It's that love which answers our questions. Love others with the love of Jesus. The world will always reject you and your priorities. But God's love changes hearts.

Prayer: Lord, it is exciting and humbling for us to spend time considering how great your love for us is. It moves and motivates us, and it creates in us a real hope even in the midst of rejection. Remind us, every day, that your love is the solution when we face rejection from the world. Your love is the thing that can move and motivate those who are not in your family now. We pray for them, that your gospel message would flow through us into their hearts. Amen.

Activity: Have each person participating in this devotion name two wonderful things about God. Try to think of things many people don't know about God that they would respond well to if they understood them.

Isaiah 40:11

Does power scare you? When placed into a position of power, many take advantage and see themselves as a dictator, making those underneath them submit to whatever the leader deems is right. Does it scare you that the Sovereign LORD reigns in power? Because that's exactly what Isaiah 40:10 says.

The Lord, however, does not rule like so many human rulers do. Yes, he rules in power, but also in love- which is exactly why he follows the notion of the LORD ruling in power, with the picture of a shepherd tending his flock. This verse does not contradict Isaiah 40:10, but rather completes it. We now have a fuller picture of our God- that he is not only ruling on our behalf, but everything God does has one goal, and that is to bring us to the perfect peace that comes from living in his presence.

After being brow-beaten day in and day out with our personal battle with sin, he wants to treat us as a loving shepherd, holding us close and cradling us in our weakness. He even loves us so much that he invites us to live with him forever in eternal peace- a peace that neither you or I can grasp with our human minds.

This peace is something that I crave, and I'm guessing you do too. He gives us this peace by giving us repentant hearts, a perfect promise of salvation, and the daily encouragement in his Word.

Yes our God is so incredibly powerful, and we thank him that he is. Because he uses that power daily to command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. He uses that power to fight the devil off, because you are his own. You are his precious sheep that he loves dearly. Don't let God's power scare you- let it bring you comfort.

Are we broken? Yes. Are we loved? There is no doubt. Let this bring you comfort every single day. God's peace be with you all. Amen.

Prayer: God of all power and might, bring me comfort in my brokenness. May it bring me to my knees, resting only in the grace and glory of the Good Shepherd. What love you have shown me! Bring me close to you each day in your Word and let me rest in your almighty arms. In Jesus' saving name- Amen!

Activity: As an individual or family, make a list of the 4 verbs that Isaiah uses to describe God's love in this verse. Then discuss the comfort in each word as he brings peace to the broken.

Have you ever felt rejected? I can remember as a young man, picking teams for a school-yard kickball game, and seeing the look on my good friend's face as he was picked last. He felt unwanted, unappreciated, and rejected.

Rejected would be an all too fitting of a description of so many in the world that you and I live, wouldn't it? Many deal with the struggle depression and not feeling worth anything at all. Others constantly fight the battle of racial segregation and continuously work to "fit in" with the social norm. Still others are rejected by their own families- the ones that are supposed to love them the most!

Rejected is, unfortunately, how many see themselves, and often times it's a hard title to shake. If we can correctly analyze many human beings in this way, then how much so was this true for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords?

Jesus' purpose on earth was never a mystery. Even before he was born, recall how an angel told Joseph what Jesus' purpose was- "You are to give him the name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matt. 1:21) His purpose was so clear, so there is no way he could be rejected as the incarnate Christ, right?

Reading Scripture to those in his hometown, they sought to throw him off of a cliff. Preaching the truth, he was dubbed as a blasphemer and false Christ. Performing miracles, many wanted to make him an earthly king.

Reaching God's people with life-giving Word—one moment they were shouting "Hail to the Son of David", and the next they were shouting "crucify"! Why would Christ be willing to undergo so much rejection?

So that you wouldn't have to. Jesus willingly went underwent mental and physical abuse, because his goal wasn't his protection, it was yours. On that very cross, Jesus paid the price for all the anguish, pain, and rejection you have experienced. He experienced rejection so we would not have to carry the title "rejected" into eternity. For a world full of broken and rejected humans, there is no greater comfort than to know that even though he was rejected, the Lord of all grace is our capstone. He holds us together day in and day out, and will never let us fall. He grants us a peace like any other, for nothing can separate us from the love of Christ!

Prayer: God of grace and mercy, I have often been rejected by those of this world. I praise and thank you for undergoing rejection, all so that I could receive your love through Christ. Grant me peace and comfort in the chief cornerstone as my rock and my salvation. Amen

Activity: Ask those around you how they have been rejected in their lives. Then use the devotion passage to be reminded how God never has or will reject or leave us.

Eight years.

Eight long, hard, difficult years. Are you kidding me? That's what it takes to be a Pastor? Do I really want to take a large portion of my life and dedicate it to studying and preparing for a calling that takes me to an unknown place, an unknown people, and a potentially far-away place to shepherd a flock of God's people?

The decision was not easy, nor was the path, but it was one of the greatest decisions that I've made. Why? Because God has now called me to serve a world in desperate need of preaching and teaching the message of Christ-crucified. And for me, there has been no greater joy in life.

I've had the opportunity to see tears flowing out of the eyes of hurting Christians who are reminded that they are children of the heavenly Father. I've sat with the downtrodden as they have been confined to a hospital bed. I've baptized young and old, assuring them that their souls have been washed clean in the blood of the lamb. There was peace for the broken.

You see, being a pastor really comes down to two things: 1) loving God, and 2) loving people.

Do you realize that God called you to a priesthood as well? A famous preacher put it really well when he said, "I preach at least 400 times a week. Though I preach only once on Sunday, my 400 members go out into the byways of life, into the shops and offices, and multiply my message 400 times." By faith in Jesus they belonged to the priesthood of all believers. And how true that is!

Do you think that you and I are worthy of this priesthood, though? Absolutely not! Because of sin, everyone deserves nothing but God's anger and eternal punishment. The priesthood that you and I are called to was made possible only by Jesus. As the great High Priest and the Living stone, he made one sacrifice for the sins of the world. He gave himself, and no more sacrifice for sin is needed.

This stone is precious, Peter tells us! The precious stone of Jesus, more precious than rubies, was hand-picked from eternity. God had chosen his one and only Son to save fallen mankind from sin, death and Satan. Praise God that he has made us who we are... "We are living stones being built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood." There is peace, Christians! And it's only through Christ. Amen.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help me never to forget that I belong to the priesthood of all believers. When I stray, lead me to repentance. Build me up, dear Lord, and bring me peace, all for the sake of Christ. Amen.

Activity: After you read this devotion, go around the room with your family and ask each person to share how God has made him/her part of the "priesthood of all believers".

What do you see when you look in the mirror? Are you happy with what appears? Anybody who is honest with themselves will always see apparent flaws. It seems as if children are in general happy with who they are. They are happy to simply have a body that can run, jump, and skip. They are happy to have a face that can smile, eat, and shout. But there always comes a day, when suddenly and perhaps slowly, we begin to look at ourselves differently. We are concerned with what others see. Subsequently, we are concerned with what we see. Does my nose look normal? Will other people like the way my hair looks? My ears look weird! And it never really stops from there. Into adulthood, as our hair begins to thin, our bodies begin to swell, our skin begins to wrinkle, it is an all too depressing task to wake up and look at how we appear.

What is it about our appearance that bothers us so much? The truth is, it is rejection. We are in constant worry that who we are is not enough. This struggle makes incredible sense. The Bible teaches us that when sin came into the world it corrupted everything. Everything, including our body is broken and breaking. In that way, in our appearance, we see our unworthiness. We see the big and little ways that make us worthy of being rejected by others—especially by God.

But consider our text. The last person you would expect to be rejected is Jesus! On Christmas, we see this perfect, precious Son of God come into the world. Nobody would reject him! But Isaiah prophesies just that. He, who is worthy of gifts, praise, and embrace would himself experience the kind of rejection you and I experience, but to an eternal degree. When Jesus took on human flesh, he would not remain a precious baby with wise men around him in celebration. He was set on a path to become the most rejected individual of all time. By his grace and his love for the rejected, for you and me, he was despised and he was rejected. All of this so that we would never be rejected again. Instead, thanks to Jesus, we are eternally embraced by our Savior.

Prayer: Dear Lord, may the gift of your Son, Jesus, always remind us that while we may appear unworthy, we know this is not the case. Through his work, you have made us perfect in your eyes. Amen.

Activity: Make a list of the things people judge about others. Then, one by one, consider the ways in which the world similarly judged Jesus in his life.

In grade school, there were two boys living in two completely different worlds. Johnny was popular, but had questionable grades. Benjamin was unpopular, but had excellent grades. These two boys were at the same school, in the same grade, in the same classroom, and rode the same bus. They saw each other every day, but they never spoke to one another. That is until Johnny was in trouble. Johnny's grades had become so bad, that his teacher said if they didn't improve, he would be held back a grade. As a result, the teacher offered him a solution: Benjamin. Benjamin volunteered to help Johnny with his school work every day after class.

It was an incredibly kind gesture from someone Johnny had no relationship with. Every day, Benjamin met with Johnny after school. Weeks went by and the report cards came home. Johnny made the grades. A few days later, as Benjamin was carrying his lunch tray in the cafeteria, one of Johnny's friends tripped Benjamin causing his tray to spill all over the floor. Johnny sat there. Johnny did not help Benjamin. Instead, he said, "*Nice one, nerd.*" How could he do that? Benjamin spared his time for him, he was kind to him, and what did he do to deserve that kind of rejection?

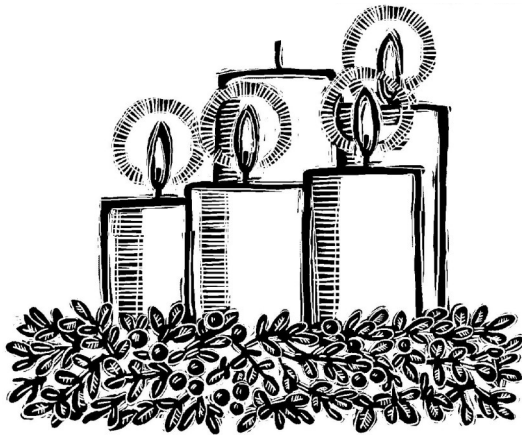
The answer is: nothing. Perhaps you have experienced a similar form of undeserved rejection and can relate to how Benjamin felt. This story reminds me of Jesus for a particular reason. After that event, Benjamin still met with Johnny every day after school to continue to help him with his homework. Johnny didn't deserve it. When we consider today the interaction between ourselves and our God, it is really no different. We have not and will not live worthy lives. Despite the amount of grace God has given us, we still regularly sin. Isaiah reminds us that despite this, even knowing this, Jesus still comes to us. Because of our sin we don't deserve kindness, but that is what we get from Jesus, to the extent that he suffers the eternal pain, the piercing, the crushing, and the wounds of our sins. See how gracious our God is!

Prayer: Dear Jesus, let us never forget how much you love us as you have proven through the undeserved punishment you suffered for our sake. Amen.

Activity: Think of some ways you have been hurt when you didn't deserve it and offer forgiveness for it. Think of some ways you have been helped when you didn't deserve it and offer thanks for it.

Peace
for those

BROKEN BY LONELINESS



FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Take away the burden of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

There was a doctor from Nigeria living in the United States who had been given a very long African name that meant “child who takes away the anger.” While she most often used a shorter English name, people would still ask her what her African name meant. In response, she tells the story of how when her parents first met, their parents didn’t approve of the relationship. As things got more serious, both families became angry that their children were dating. It got so bad that the families threatened to disown their children if they went through with a marriage. Her parents loved each other and went through with the marriage. True to their word, the grandparents stopped speaking to their children. This lasted for a while until the first grandchild was born – the “child who takes away the anger.” Then both families wanted to be so involved with the new baby that they put their anger away and forgot their differences because of this newborn child.

Jesus is the child who takes away the anger. He is the one who came to take away God’s anger over sin. That child may have looked small as a newborn wrapped in cloths and placed in a feed trough, but his purpose was big. He came to be a Savior of all. He did this by living a life that was perfectly pleasing to God and by dying a death to satisfy all payment for sin. As a result, when God looks at us he no longer sees our sin but he sees Jesus and his righteousness.

Because of Jesus we receive new names. The Bible gives us names like “Righteous,” “Sons and Daughters of the Most High,” “Dearly Loved,” and “Saints of God.” These are not names we deserve but names we receive because Jesus saved his people from their sins.

There is no anger. Mary gave birth to a child and named him Jesus. This Jesus has saved you from your sins.

Prayer: Gracious God, you instructed Mary to name her son Jesus, for he would save his people from their sins. We thank you that Jesus is the only name by which we must be saved. Amen.

Activity: Learn what your name means. (The internet will be a big help.) Also find out what your families names mean and also what the names of your favorite people from the Bible mean. Write this all down on a piece of paper and on the top of that paper write: “Jesus saved these people from their sins.”

Isaiah 7:14

It was never the physical pain that made him cry out. It wasn't the beatings nor the scourge, not even the nails driven through flesh. The pain that made Jesus cry out on the cross was being separated from and abandoned by God. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This separation from God was what caused his suffering. This loneliness was the pain that pierced his soul.

There is no loneliness like being apart from God. Nothing cures that loneliness like Jesus, the one called Immanuel – God with us.

There is so much that separates us from God and so much pain that separation causes. Our sins, our doubts, our failings; these all place us apart from God.

God's plan was to fix this separation by coming to be with you in your loneliness. He wraps his own Son in human flesh and comes to visit with us.

Don't miss that today. Among everything that happens today, whether you are surrounding yourselves with lots of friends and family or whether you are alone this Christmas, don't miss this: God came to be with you.

Yes, he came to be present in the manger that first Christmas. More than that, he came to be with you forever. He came to this earth to live a perfect life in your place and to die for all your sins. He defeated sin, death, and the devil so that nothing could separate you from God ever again. He promises to be with you even now as he sits at the right hand of God and rules all things for your good. More than a manger, God came to be with you forever. That is Christmas: God with us.

Prayer: God, you are with us. Continue to make your dwelling in our hearts and in homes and in our churches, that we would never be separated from your grace, mercy, and love. Be with all who feel alone this day, and remind all of us that your love will never leave us. Amen.

Activity: Take some time and think about who will be lonely at your church this Christmas (examples: shut-ins, those living far from family, those in the military, those in the hospital). Say a prayer for them. Then, if you can, call them or write a brief note, even if it will get delivered later, to wish them a blessed and a merry Christmas.

John 1:14

Human words have power. This has probably been driven home a time or two. Maybe you have been the one who spoke hurtful words or maybe you have had hurtful words spoken to you, but you have more than likely seen that words can cause incredible pain. It is also true that that words can bring needed healing. A well-spoken word can bring hope and healing to those who need it. Words have powerfully started wars and inspired incredible human achievement. For good or evil, words have power.

We marvel even more at the power of God's Word. The opening verses of the Bible remind us of the power of God's Word – he simply speaks and all the universe is pulled out of nothing. Elsewhere in the Scriptures, we see the power of God's Word as he sends famine, topples kings, and sends fire and smoke from the heavens. In the gospels, God's Son says to storming skies and raging seas "be still" and instantly they were calm. He spoke to the dead and immediately they lived.

When God describes how he sent his Son to earth he chose to describe him in John 1 as "The Word." You cannot separate Jesus from all that God has said and all that he has done and all that he will do. All the power behind all those words finds its place in Jesus. All of God came to this earth to be with us and to be for us.

When this Word speaks, he has power. When Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," you can be certain that Jesus means every one of those words and that Jesus is the true way to eternal life. When Jesus says, "God so loved the world..." there is no reason to doubt that God does in fact love you. When Jesus says, "It is finished" you can be confident that there is no longer any punishment or sacrifice to be made for sin.

Jesus is the Word because he is the fulfillment of everything God has said. The Word has come to us this Christmas.

Prayer: Lord of all, thank you for sending Christ into this world as a fulfillment of all you have promised. Cause us to turn only to this Word made flesh for answers, direction, power, and life. Amen.

Activity: What is your favorite Bible verse? Share it with your family.

It was the most wonderful time of the year. At least that's what the songs on the radio were telling you. Yet Christmas is also among the loneliest times for people. You build up to big meals. You buy big presents. You get together with family from all over the country. And then it all stops.

Christmas can also serve as a dark reminder of how relationships were, but aren't anymore. You remember loved ones who can no longer join your Christmas dinner because they are in heaven. You relive tensions that seem to have been in your family forever. Some days you might feel like a stranger even in your own house. It feels lonely as you say goodbye at the airport and wonder when you'll see each other again.

Furthermore, Christmas can turn into a time of stress and worry. It has its sad and lonely moments. But God wants you to know you are not alone. God has not left your side. He is here to help. That was true on the first Christmas.

As shepherds watched their flocks in the lonely hours of the night, God sent his angels with a message of peace: But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. –Luke 2:10-11

Those words are not just for shepherds keeping watch in a field near Jesus' birth place. They are for you. Those words speak to the joy we have as we celebrate Jesus' birth, even in the midst of loneliness.

...Do not be afraid. Your fears are not bigger than Jesus. He's here to help.

...I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. You are not left out. The joy Jesus came to bring is for everyone. If this joy is for everyone, this joy is also for you.

...A Savior has been born to you. Jesus was born to save you from your sins. He saved you from hell. He able to save you from loneliness and give you peace.

...He is Christ the Lord. He is the promised one who would bring us peace with God. He will lead you to heaven, and lead you every step of the way until you get there. Jesus is your peace.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, continue to comfort me with your peace. Amen.

Activity: God does not want you to feel alone. Many times, when you felt lonely or scared, God used other people to encourage you. Think about five people in your life who have encouraged you when you felt lonely and try to encourage them like they encouraged you.

One of the songs that I always hear around the Christmas season had nothing to do with Santa Claus. Jesus' birth wasn't the focus either. It seems around this time of the year I would hear a song about loneliness. Every verse ended the same way: *Alone again, naturally*. It's a dark song, yet I've only heard it around Christmas. A man is stood up at the altar of his church, left alone. He was at his dad's funeral broken by how lonely his mom would be, left alone. Finally, she is taken away from him. He even feels God had left him. Each haunting verse ends the same way: *Alone again, naturally*.

Wouldn't it be nice if God would prove he hasn't left us? Wouldn't it be great if he could show you that you are not alone? In an amazing section of Scripture, God shows a couple shepherds just how close he and his angels are to his people:

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

God's favor rests on you. You were baptized into his family. He speaks to you in his Word. He listens to your prayers and helps you. Jesus cared more about you than he cared about himself. He became your brother to be one with you. He fulfilled God's law to make you righteous in God's sight. He died to bring you peace with God. He sends his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. Your God isn't ignorant to your needs. He knows what hurts and knows how to help. Even today his angels bless you in ways you won't understand to heaven is your home. You are not alone. God and his angels are near to be your peace. For all God does, he deserves glory.

Prayer & Activity: One of the most time-tested hymns in the history of the church is called the *Gloria in Excelsis*, which means Glory to God in the highest. The hymn borrows from the angels' song the shepherds heard. Pray the *Gloria in Excelsis*.

Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace, good will toward men. We praise you, we bless you, we worship you, we glorify you, we give thanks to you, your great glory, O Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father almighty.

O Lord, the only begotten Son, Jesus Christ; O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, you take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us. You take away the sin of the world; receive our prayer. You sit at the right hand of God the Father; have mercy on us. For you only are holy; you only are the Lord. You only, O Christ, with the Holy Spirit, are most high in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

What are you waiting for? It's good to have something on the horizon. Something to look forward to. Maybe it's a vacation. Maybe it's a friend or relative coming to visit. Maybe it's a basketball game or a concert.

Simeon had something he was looking forward to. The Bible says that the Holy Spirit had told him that he would not die before he saw the "Lord's Christ," the promised Savior.

We don't know how old Simeon was. We don't know how long he had been waiting. But finally, the day came. Moved by the Spirit, Simeon came face to face with the one he was waiting for. In fact, he came face to face with the one the whole world was waiting for – Jesus.

Do you think it shocked Simeon when he met him? If I were Simeon, I might have expected something different. Someone who was rich and powerful – or at least old enough to walk! But through eyes of faith Simeon lifted Jesus up and spoke the words we know so well. He praised God that he kept his promise and sent the Savior of the world.

Throughout our lives, there are a lot of things we look forward to. Trips come and go. Visits end. What is new becomes old. More than that, as life goes on we look forward to different kinds of things. What excites a child is different from what excites an adult and what one looks forward to, the other might not. But whether you are a child or an adult, there is always one thing on the horizon for us – heaven. This child that Simeon held in his arms died and rose to make it so.

Prayer: Faithful Lord, you kept your promise to send a Savior for the world. Help us with eyes of faith to live our lives looking forward to the day when you dismiss us in peace and bring us to the place you've prepared to us in heaven. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Activity: What are you looking forward to? Take a moment to give everyone the opportunity to list at least one thing they are looking forward to. Why are you looking forward to that? Is it hard to wait?

Does her life seem lonely to you? It's easy to read about Anna and focus on who *wasn't* there. She had no husband. Luke writes that her husband died after 7 years of marriage, which means she had been a widow for most of her life. You don't hear about kids or grandkids. Her parents, her siblings, her childhood friends were probably all gone. It sounds like the only people in her life were the people she saw at the temple as she worshipped, fasted, and prayed day and night.

Can you imagine? Imagine life without the people mentioned just a moment ago. Imagine life without your parents, your kids, your brothers, your sisters, your friends, your neighbors, your grandparents, your aunts and uncles. Some of the greatest gifts God gives us are our human relationships and so losing those relationships hurts.

But even without all these relationships we value so much, Anna was never alone – and neither are you. Because we have a God who comes to us.

That day in the temple, Son of God came to Anna as a baby. The creator of the universe was cradled in Simeon's arms! He was there so that we would never be alone. In life and in death, we have a God who is with us because Jesus came to redeem us. He became a human child so that he could pay the price our sin deserves with his death on the cross and so he would remove the sin that separates us from God.

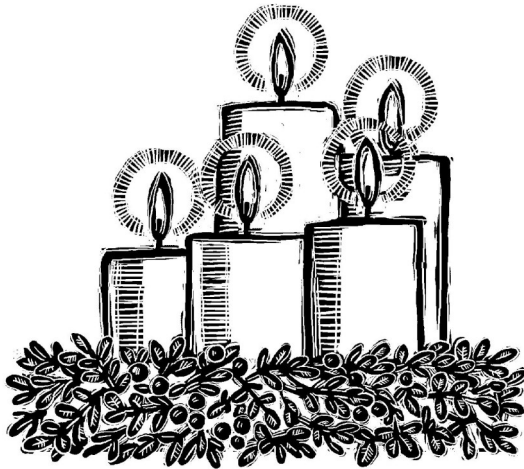
Today God is still a God who comes to us. He came to you in the waters of your baptism. He comes to you in the quiet whisper of his Word and in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. There God comes to you to make you his child and to keep you his child. There he promises that even if you lose all the human relationships you value most, you are never alone.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank you for coming to us in Word and Sacrament and making us your children. We often fail to appreciate our place in your family, yet you came to this world to forgive us for our sins. Help us to remember, no matter how lonely we feel at times, that you never leave our side. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Activity: Take a moment to make a list of the people you are thankful to have in your lives. Let everyone share at least one example and let them explain why they are thankful for that person.

Peace
for those

BROKEN BY THE WORLD



FIRST WEEK OF CHRISTMAS

Almighty God, grant that the birth of your one and only Son in the flesh may set us free from our old bondage under the yoke of sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

On the last calendar day of 2017, after counting off another 365 days, is reality setting in? Everything is another year along. We're all going to be one year older. The cars we drive are another model year older. The cell phones we carry are one year closer to being obsolete. At the change of a year it seems we mark time passing even more. But for anyone who spent 2017 broken by the world, time has been in a constant state of being counted.

For every moment we spent working ourselves to the point of exhaustion, just so we could keep up with the world around us, we only realize all too clearly that taking a vacation day is a long way off. Every moment we spent grinding away at school projects or continuing education credits, just so we could get the grade or make the extra money, only crystalized how much we've stayed the same. Another year, another day, another hour, it really doesn't seem to matter. Every one of them has been tough and we feel broken.

Stop and think about Jesus' promise of heaven as he spoke it to Martha. Do you think we'll count off years in heaven? I don't think so. Why would we have to? There won't be a need. Eternity lasts a long time and perfection doesn't need to be tracked. With our sins forgiven in Christ, we won't spend a moment in heaven broken. Every day, every hour, every second is going to be perfect. Jesus promises your broken years will be left behind when he brings you to heaven. In him you will live. Even today, even though you might feel broken by the world, Christ Jesus promises he is the resurrection. In him you have the promise of resurrection for yourself. In Christ you will never die.

If 2017 wasn't great, if it broke you down, if the world crushed harder than in the past, take heart. Christ Jesus urges you to believe in him and you will never die. You can never be broken. The world can't get you down. Heaven is your eternal home.

Prayer: Father, the days of the past year were exactly what you wanted them to be for me. Let me take comfort in your promises that whether they were good or bad, they were all for my eternal good. Rest my belief in the promise that your Son Jesus is my resurrection and life and that in him I will live. Amen.

Activity: Take stock of your 2017. Was it good? Was it bad? List some of your favorite moments that you want to give God thanks for. List some areas where you pray God improves your life in 2018.

Already in the new year you're probably feeling renewed. There's something refreshing about entering a new year, turning the calendar, and seeing January 1 as the date. It allows us to feel like there's so much possibility, there's so much potential.

But any honest evaluation of previous years would show that years never really turn out the way we wish or expect. We live in a broken world. That means we will be broken at times too by the world. The potential that the beginning of the year brings turns into job loss. The possibility that a new year starts with quickly can fade into health issues or financial problems no one saw coming. We end up broken. No peace. Feeling only the trouble of the world.

Take heart! Those are Jesus' words to you. Take heart as you look to your Savior this day and all year long. Your potential and possibility are connected to him. But in Christ this is not a worldly hope, like something that might happen. Christ makes potential and possibility a reality. He doesn't guarantee a year without job loss, health or financial problems. But Jesus does make you this promise. Like last year and the one before that, your year will have you at peace with God. Peace because the Savior has overcome the world.

It was during his own life on earth that Jesus looked broken by the world. He had few friends. He had no place of rest. He didn't have worldly treasure or the trappings of fame. Jesus suffered and died a criminal's death. But it was all that, the brokenness of his humility, that gives you peace. Christ Jesus has overcome the world. He has defeated sin, death, and Satan in your place. You have peace even though you may have trouble. You have peace with God. You have his promises. Take heart Christ has overcome the world for you!

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for the victory of peace that you won for me and have given to me freely. Help me to remember that peace on those days when I am feeling broken down by the world. Remind me that it only looks like I'm defeated, like I'm broken. I can take heart in your promises of grace because you have overcome the world. Amen.

Activity: What is on your list of New Year's resolutions for this year? What spiritual resolutions have you set? Might your list include a resolution to grow in your ability to take heart because Christ has overcome the world? What might you do to make that happen?

Do you ever look at the lives of unbelievers and get a little, maybe even a lot, resentful? “Why do they get to live in beautiful mansions, and I live in a cramped little house? How come they always have more than enough money, and I can barely stay ahead of my bills? Why do they always look healthy and handsome and beautiful, and I always seem to have all sorts of health issues?”

You're not alone in those feelings. A believer by the name of Asaph in the Bible had those same emotions. He wrote a Psalm about it, Psalm 73. Asaph was a church musician. He had heard often in church that God is good to his people. But then he went out in the real world, and he saw just the opposite. God seems to pour out good things on unbelievers, he thought, while he lets his own children struggle and suffer.

Asaph's complaint against God is one we've all felt. Why does God allow guilty criminals to get out on parole and live free and easy? Why does he allow dictators to flaunt their evil? Why do terrorists get away with murder?

Asaph did the right thing with his doubts. He went again to the “sanctuary of God,” the church. This time he listened more intently to God's Word. There in God's Word he learned that God really does punish unbelievers. Criminals suffer with a guilty conscience the rest of their lives, always wondering when God will catch up to them. Dictators are eventually overthrown. Terrorists get caught or die by violence themselves. Even if unbelievers don't get caught in this life, they will suffer a terrible end - separated from God's love forever in hell, where even a drop of water will bring them immense relief (Luke 16:24).

We have something far better than the riches and fun of unbelievers. Our greatest treasure is God himself. We have God's own Son Jesus. There is nothing on earth that can even remotely compare to Jesus. We have forgiveness of all our sins. We have peace in our conscience every moment that since we are forgiven, God is making all things work in our life for our eventual good. We have treasures laid up for us in heaven that are indescribable.

When we are tempted to doubt God's goodness and fairness, let's look beyond this world to the real world to come. Then in this broken world, God will give us out of this world peace. Amen.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, whenever I envy others, remind me that you died and rose again to give me heaven. Amen.

Activity: Everyone honestly admit something you see others have that you wish you had. Discuss how long that thing lasts. Talk about something you have in Jesus that is far better.

Ten years ago at Christmas I was diagnosed with a serious health problem. The doctor said it's progressive and incurable. Like it or not, my body is slowly breaking down. When the flesh starts to fail, it's easy for the heart to follow. "Why is God letting this happen to me? I'm one of his children by faith in Jesus. Doesn't he love me anymore?"

Asaph, the writer of Psalm 73, had the same experience. It not only discouraged him to see all the pain in the world around him. He had physical and spiritual pain himself. He did not say, "My flesh (body) and my heart (soul) *may* fail." Literally, he said: "My flesh and my heart *fail*." In other words, "*My* body is failing. *I'm* discouraged because of it."

Every Christian experiences the same physical and spiritual pain as Asaph. It's not just other people who slowly age and die. The wages of sin is death for all of us. We are all fading away like the grass and flowers of the field. And our heart fails, also. We carry guilt because of our past sins. We wonder how God really feels about us. We double clutch in our private moments: "Will I really be standing there on the right side of Jesus in the end?"

But notice how Asaph conquered. He says, "God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." The word for *strength* is actually the Hebrew word "rock." Our strength is in the Rock of Ages, Jesus Christ. His blood washes away all our sins. His perfect life is our righteousness before God's throne. His empty grave means we will rise, too. His glorified body is what we will also have. His ascension to the right hand of God assures us that he is making all things – not just our health issues, but also our financial stresses, family problems, everything – all work for our eventual good. And he will soon return in glory to take us home to heaven.

Jesus is our *portion forever*. The word refers to the land given to each Israelite family when they entered the promised land of Canaan. It was their allotted inheritance. Jesus is our portion forever. In heaven we will see him face to face. There will be no more pain or sickness or death. We will leap like newborn calves out of the stall. There will be perfect peace forever. And that peace starts right now through Jesus.

Prayer: Lord, be my Strength when earthly strength fails. In this new year, help me to comfort and strengthen others with your Word.

Activity: Have each member of the family talk about a personal pain – physical or spiritual - that causes them discouragement. The other members of the family offer Christian comfort and encouragement from God's Word.

They were only separated for a moment. Mom was focusing on the shopping and making sure that she purchased everything on her list. Suddenly, she realized that her little boy was not with her. He had to be right around the corner. But he wasn't in that aisle. Or the next, or the next. And that's when the little twinge of fear began to rise up in her heart.

The little boy had his attention captured by the row of toys and his favorite superhero. After stopping to admire the toy for what seemed like just a moment, he ran to catch up with his mom. He looked down the aisle... but she wasn't there. Well, she had to be in the next aisle, but she wasn't. Or the next aisle. And that's when the tears started coming.

Mom decided to backtrack her steps, and there he was. The whole time they were maybe 100 feet apart at the most, they were near each other, but that distance for a moment seemed a bit greater to both of them in an unfamiliar place, and with a bunch of strangers who they did not know. So she gives him a hug, she kisses him on the top of the head, and she comforts him. "I was right here the whole time. Mommy didn't leave you. Mommy was nearby the whole time."

"For you are with me," David wrote. The Lord was more than *near* him. The Lord, David believed, was actually *with* him.

But can that really be? We can think of many reasons why the Lord wouldn't want to be anywhere near us. But he's not far away, not far away at all. He speaks to us through the Word of God, the Bible. Don't expect dramatic visions as his form of communication, but do expect to hear him in God's Word. He knows you, knows you so very well. Knows each and every sin and failure, he also knows that he paid for them completely. He knows every anxiety, every fear, every bit of stress, and invites us to draw even nearer to him through his Word. We treasure those words from Psalm 23. God is more than near us. He is with us.

Prayer: Sing or pray together the words of this verse from the hymn "I Lay My Sins on Jesus."

I rest my soul on Jesus, This weary soul of mine.
His right hand me embraces; I in his arms recline.
I love the name of Jesus, Immanuel, Christ the Lord;
Like fragrance on the breezes His name abroad is poured. Amen. (CW Hymn 372, v.3)

Activity: How many Bible stories can you think of where people were reunited after they were separated for a while? How did they respond? Relate that to the comfort of Psalm 23:4.

Ruth 1:13, 4:14-15

Naomi was bitter. The men in her life were supposed to provide for her future. Three graves marked the painful present. While living in the land of Moab to scratch out an existence during a time of famine in Israel, Naomi was forced to bury her husband and her two sons.

Since the land of Moab had not been kind to her, Naomi planned to go home—to Israel. She was not completely alone. Her two daughters-in-law still lived in her home. But they were natives of Moab. She could not expect them to go to the foreign land of Israel. It wasn't like she had any more sons that they could marry. She could not provide for them. Naomi had no future and she knew that if these two daughters-in-law stayed with her, they had no future either. So she absolved them of any loyalties to her and urged them to return home. One did. The other, Ruth, stayed.

When she made it home to Bethlehem, the townspeople were excited to see her. Naomi asked her old acquaintances to call her by a new name. She was no longer Naomi. "Call me Mara, said Naomi, "for it means 'bitter'."

We can experience the same bitterness at times. Anyone who has stayed in the hospital for any length of time, anyone who has fought through anxiety or depression, anyone who has suffered through financial loss, or the loss of a loved one, may be tempted to say, "Call me Mara, for I am bitter."

Little could Naomi know how her life would work out. Little could she see how her daughter-in-law Ruth would soon marry a relative of hers. Little could she dream that the child born to Ruth and her new husband Boaz would be the grandfather of Israel's greatest king, David. Little could she imagine that her empty hands would soon be filled with a child through whom the Savior would come.

We can't really know either all that God has planned for us...other than he has a plan. When life leaves a bitter taste in your mouth, or your soul, remember Naomi. She experienced tragedy. She felt God had given her only bitterness. What he provided, even through tragedy, was the sweetest and the best: your Savior.

Prayer: Sing or pray together the words of this verse from the hymn "Ah, Dearest Jesus."

Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,
Prepare a bed, soft, undefiled
Within my heart, made clean and new
A quiet chamber kept for you. (CW 38, v.13)

Activity: How far back can you go in your family tree? Think about all the names and people God "used" to bring you where you are in your life, at this moment. Even more importantly, how God used others to bring you salvation. This is your "spiritual" family tree.



THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD

Almighty God, grant that the birth of your one and only Son in the flesh may set us free from our old bondage under the yoke of sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Our family took a vacation years ago to western South Dakota. One place we visited was Wind Cave National Park. It is one of the largest caves in the world with over 140 miles of known passages. We followed our guide underground and she brought us to a large cavern lit by electric lights. She explained that we were about 55 feet underground. Then she turned out the lights. It is unnerving to experience total darkness. We all strained to catch some faint glow, some little shimmer of light, but there was none. Just the deepest of darkness.

God's people were feeling that deepest darkness in Isaiah's day. Their nation has been overrun, their people carried off into slavery, they despair so much that they can't possibly see any good, even God has failed them. As Isaiah says, "Darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the people." That doom and gloom came from the despair they felt over being conquered and something else, it was the realization of and knowledge of their sinfulness. For it was sin that brought about the destruction of their nation.

Doom and gloom. You ever feel that way in your relationship with God? Doom and gloom. You see failure—most of all that of others. You think of how someone hurt and angered you, cast this dark cloud over you and you just felt like raining gloom all over the place.

And then we open God's Word and we hear Isaiah's command. "Arise, shine for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you!" What makes him giddy and hopeful in the middle of this gloom? Well, it's light. The only light that could bring any joy to people who saw the guilt of their sin and the damage that it had caused. Isaiah is reminding them of God's promise to send a Savior, Jesus, and what that meant for them. They had an eternal inheritance to look forward to where there would be no doom and gloom and no sin.

Because Jesus is the Light we have something to be joyful about, the doom and gloom of sin has been removed. We need to know that. And when all we see is the darkness of sin in ourselves and this world, we need to be reminded, Jesus is the Light. Listen to what God tells us in his Word: Don't despair. No doom and gloom. Arise, shine, your light has come! Amen.

Prayer: Sing or pray together the words of this verse from the hymn "O Light of Gentile Nations."

Lord, when life's troubles touch us, You seem to hide your face.
And through our tears we often Can scarcely sense your grace.
Then be our joy and brightness, Our cheer in pain and loss,
Our sun in darkest terror, The glory round our cross. Amen. (CW Hymn 78, v.3)

Activity: Jesus called himself "The Light of the world" several times. Come up with as many reasons as you can as to why "light" is such a great descriptive word for Jesus.

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