

**Devotions – December 19-25, 2021**

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**Sunday, December 19, 2021**

Text: Luke 1:37-38

***“For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.”***

Today we begin the final days prior to the celebration of the birth of Jesus, our Savior. We have waited four weeks during the season of Advent watching and waiting. How have we spent the time as we waited? Have we continued to busy ourselves with all the outside activity of our lives, working at our jobs, planning family celebrations, purchasing or making gifts for one and all?

Or have we been waiting, listening, and examining ourselves in seeing and acknowledging our areas of weakness and sin so that we can mature as Christians? Imagine having a conversation with Jesus on our interior attitudes and disposition for the day. Have your thoughts, your aspirations, your words, your actions of the day been worthy of one of his apostles? Have my problems overcome me again today? How many times have I fallen? What was the reason? Did I think it over well?

Have I thought about the means available to me so his grace might increase in me? Have I neglected to perform worship, Holy Communion? Why?

How long has it been since I visited my pastor or my spiritual director? When will I go? How have I been in responding to the calls of service that he has placed upon my heart and provided me with the gifts to use? Why could I not have been more generous, more courageous, more self-sacrificing or more cheerful to step up? I am never too young or too old to answer his call because I know that “nothing will be impossible with God.”

With a little effort couldn't I have overcome the obstacles which I found along the road today? Haven't I had the time to be a disciple? Listen: isn't it true that for the things which really interest you, you do find the time? I who am your God would almost be satisfied if you would treat me as well as you treat any of your friends.

Are you with me– or against me? At work–in your profession–at recreation–have you been my disciple? Would you have been proud to have me accompany you through the day?

Remember that the infidelities of the “faithful” are the infidelities which wound my heart most. I COUNT ON YOU! And you, on whom or what do you count?

For some of us Sunday worship is where we replenish our souls with the hearing of God's Word, and sometimes it is the only time that we take the opportunity to encounter his Word. For one

who inherited the position of matriarch of the family at the age of 40, I need more than an hour a week with my Savior. I need a relationship that can help me through each day. If I am going to share the gospel like my friend, Jesus, wishes me to, then I need to be filled with the Holy Ghost each day and for each step that I take while I am on this earthly journey. I need to be there to listen, not to fix; to pray for God's will to be done; to be the only Jesus with skin on that someone may encounter and to fill their day with the Grace of God with only a smile if need be. God places people in my life to help me. God places me in the lives of others to help them. God uses me as the pebble dropped into the pond that creates ripples that reach far beyond the initial meeting of someone and only he knows where each journey of the affected children will end.

Let us pray: *Dear Heavenly Father, we pray that we take each step forward in faith remembering that nothing is impossible with your help. Help us to remember that when we do as you ask, that you will provide the energy and desire to move forward with your plan. Help us to listen to your call and give us the courage to step forth in your name to help your lost sheep find their way to you. God, I pray that you will open the way for the Holy Spirit to fire up those who profess their love to follow you so that the church, the people, will work tirelessly in your mission field both within the four confining walls of the building, which is just a building, and in the mission field into which we enter on a daily journey. Amen*



**Monday, December 20, 2021**

Text: Psalm 113:1-3

***“Praise the LORD! Praise, O servants of the LORD; praise the name of the LORD. Blessed be the name of the LORD from this time on and forevermore. From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the LORD is to be praised.”***

My husband and I worked for nine years with a group in prison ministry in a minimum state prison. We would spend the third Sunday of every month in a worship service with inmates that attend the service. Twice a year as a team we would enter the prison for a weekend from Friday to Sunday. We would gather in the evenings to share the events of the day in a secluded location. Each time we entered we had to register and be searched and when we were ready to leave, we had to check out.

The worship service was more on the side of a Pentecostal service, which we know is not of a Lutheran tradition, even though perhaps it should be occasionally. The energy of the Holy Spirit could be found abundant in these services. We would participate in these services to bless the inmates; however, we would always feel more blessed when we left. We learned quickly that a person cannot out-give God in the department of grace.

It was there that we first experienced the book *Prison to Praise* by Merlin Carothers. You could find this book in the charismatic section in a Christian bookstore. It talked about praising God for everything that happened in your life. Which is exactly what is being suggested in the verses of Psalm 113. You would think by the title of the book *Prison to Praise* that it would be about inmates going through the experience of being incarcerated. But it is about the individual prisons we find ourselves in after some of our life experiences. God works within the time of sorrow and the time of celebration in our lives if we only open our hearts and minds to this possibility. Giving praise for every detail of our lives to God may appear a little overboard from a Lutheran standpoint. However, we are called to give him praise and bless his name from this time on and evermore. We should give him praise for everyone that he places us with as we journey through this life. That means even if it is not the most comfortable position that we find ourselves in. Merlin has other books that he wrote on praise. They are all easy reads. Step out to your local library and see if they have copies to loan out. Merlin went to his heavenly home a few years ago, but his ministry lives on. His ministry still helps those in prison ministries by supplying free books to prison and local jails.

I try very hard to give praise for everything that happens in my life. I also try very hard not to disrespect the Lutheran tradition in which I worship and live. I have discovered that giving praise for all, helps me to grow in aspects of my faith life that help me to reach out with courage to share my faith with others. It also has benefited my relationship with Jesus, as I always ask in prayer that God's will be done.

Let us pray: *Dear Heavenly Father, may we remember to praise you each day, all day long, for the blessings which you provide for each of us. May we also trust in the knowledge that your will be done above our wants and that you will be with us to accept that your will is what is best. We do not always understand why the answer to our prayer maybe "No", so we pray to accept your decision as the right one. We ask that you help us to accept the way things work out. We are not capable of understanding the whole reason why things happen as they do. We ask this in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Amen*



**Tuesday, December 21, 2021**

Text: Romans 8:24-27

***“For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God who searches the heart, knows what is in***

***the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”***

Today, we are still waiting to celebrate the birth of the Baby Jesus. We wait patiently to be able to celebrate with our church family, our own individual families and the Angels on High. We also wait patiently for the day that each of us will be called home to spend eternity with Jesus. Looking back over my life journey up until now, how have I dealt with hope? As a child I always looked forward to the Sears and JC Penny catalogs to come in the mail. I would curl up in a chair and dream and hope that I could play with the new toys, planning a layout with the kitchen toys, and the new baby dolls. As an adolescent, hoping that I would make friends, be popular, be chosen as a cheerleader, progress to the next level in dance/tumbling. As a teenager, hoping to be popular, planning what I what to be when I grew up, hoping to get into the college of my choice. As an adult, hoping to have my dream job, a home, a husband, children. It seems that hoping was a personal thing about how my life would be. Always hoping for something different, instead of being happy and grateful for what I already had.

I think the world changes our wants and hopes, when we discover that what we have may be so different that what life could be like once we enter the wide world of society and see the mixture of those that have more and those that have less than we have. We then realize that we begin to live a life of scarcity rather than a life of abundance especially when we discover where we fit into the social scheme of things.

Circumstances change several times throughout life's journey, and we find that we have new passions as we experience new situations. Whether it be moving several times, meeting all kinds of different people from different social circumstances. We forget to wait for hope with patience. Trusting with hope in the unseen and being patient can lead us into adventures of which we do not see the ending.

As we wait with patience for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, let us set aside the anticipation of the wait and look forward to the participation of the celebration when it arrives. Let us see the wonderment and the lifting up and feeding of our souls as we go forward into another year of inviting Jesus to walk with us through all the things that are to come with open acceptance.

Let us pray: *Dear Heavenly Father, we ask that you walk with us through life's journey helping our eyes to see, our ears to hear and our mouths to speak of your love and grace to others. Help us to wait with patience and be opened to hear your calling for us to be BOLD on your behalf and willing to risk knowing that you will be with us always. Remind us in the times that we do not feel your presence that it is not you who turned away from us, but it is us who turned away from you. Help us to be more open as servants to the work of your ministry both inside and outside of the church building walls. Help us to work as a community of Christians with unconditional love for all on your behalf. Amen*



**Wednesday, December 22, 2021**

Text: Isaiah 42:14-15

***“For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant.”***

God’s ministry is not all about us and what we want. God’s ministry is about maintaining a relationship with him, getting to know him as our best friend (maybe our only friend). God’s ministry is about listening to why God sent Jesus to die for our sins. God’s ministry is about putting others before ourselves. God’s ministry is full of JOY when you understand that priorities in life should be Jesus first, others second and then you.

Good works do not get us into heaven, yet good works are needed to carry out the ministry that has been set before us. Communion does not get us into heaven, it is a rite (or action) that allows us to share in receiving the body and blood (earthly symbols) in the company of the saints who have come before us and to be an example to the saints that come after us. Baptism is a rite that uses water as an earthly symbol of the Holy Spirit inviting us into the family of God, but baptism does not give us the keys to the Kingdom. It is a rite that brings us into the community of saints and sinners.

How many parents bring their children for baptism, stand in front of the congregation with the Godparents and promise to bring their children to church, teach them the Lord’s Prayer, help them develop their faith. The congregation even promises to encourage these children in their faith. Then after we leave church, we forget to follow up on those promises.

Our family units are in disarray. Grandparents and parents that attended church as a family in bygone years still present on Sunday for worship. But it seems that generations younger have developed different priorities in their lives. It seems that they come to church when they have nothing else better to do. Young children today are mostly driven to Sunday School and then picked up after Sunday School but are unable to attend church because their parents give an example that it is not a priority to be there. We do have Christenings, those who come on Christmas and Easter. We make sure that we jump through the hoops when it comes to First Communion, making sure that our children are confirmed, being married, and buried in the church. How many of us have looked within and have come to the realization that we can no longer do church the way that our ancestors did because of societal evolution?

Do we take care of our pastor and church staff? They are liked and we know that because we call them to serve us. Pastors are called to develop leaders in the churches, to teach and to preach and listen, to guide and develop disciples to carry out the work of the ministry of the congregation. Pastors are not called to do everything by themselves. Pastors are not called to be good on our behalf. They are called to make us servants of the church and the community outside the church and to one another. Have we ever thought about stopping in the office at a set time before a service to pray for the pastor? Have we remembered that October is Pastor Appreciation Month? Do we remember our pastor at Christmas? Have we come to the acceptance that God is calling us to be partners with our pastors and be willing to volunteer

wherever we can, to use our God-given gifts for the ministry and to work in building up God's kingdom for the good of all and not just to please us and our individual needs?

Let us pray: *Dear Heavenly Father, may we begin to pray about what we each can do to build up your ministry in this world. May we learn to become BOLD when caring for each other by putting others first, right after Jesus, and relying on God to meet our needs, not so much our wants. Help us to stretch our faith and comfort zone to learn how to do your bidding in spreading the story and creating friendships in which people can see that we have something they want in their lives, a relationship with you. We pray that others will come to the realization that the church family from which they have strayed, welcomes them back to the fold unconditionally. We pray that you show us how to take care of our pastors and their families. We pray that the Holy Spirit will ignite in them a desire to make you a bigger part of their everyday life. Lead us in the direction of your will and help us to remember that you are always with us. Amen*



**Thursday, December 23, 2021**

Text: Ephesians 2:11-22

***<sup>11</sup>So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision" — a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands — <sup>12</sup>remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup>But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup>For he is our peace; in His flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. <sup>15</sup>He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup>and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. <sup>17</sup>So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup>for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup>So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup>built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. <sup>21</sup>In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; <sup>22</sup>in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.***

Gentiles, that's you and me, were once set apart from the chosen people of God. Jesus was the reason we were brought near by his blood. He brought us together as one family. It is we who have separated ourselves by continuing to create new denominations or changes in theology

because slightly different interpretations. However, I believe that we all worship the higher power by different names and that our interpretations of what is presented to us through the Bible separates us on some issues. I also believe that God loves us unconditionally even though we cannot help ourselves because of our sinful nature of wanting to be right. For myself I will celebrate our similarities and be open to discussion and conversation of our differences because I believe that we are all worthy of being children of God.

God's ministry is not about us and what we want. His ministry is about us working on his behalf in sharing the gospel with others, our stories with others, inviting people to join us in our faith journey. God's ministry needs us to be opened to change where change is needed, and his ministry needs us to step up in leadership to increase our viability into the future. If we want change, we must put some of our own skin into the project and not expect others to step up and do it all for us.

God calls on us to love one another as he loves us. We must remember that we are not perfect and can never achieve such a goal as Martin Luther states we are saints/sinners at the same time. However, God has created a path to unity for us who were far from him and for those who were near to him so that we can experience his grace and share the same access to him. The household of God is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets with Christ himself being the cornerstone.

Our responsibility within this household is to draw ourselves into a close relationship with Jesus through prayer, study, and action. Through prayer we can seek direction and wisdom for our journey and our call as Jesus places it upon our hearts. Through study we can learn about this Jesus and the lessons that he wants us to know and build upon. For me I prefer study with others as each of us can learn something through the insight and questions of others. Through action on our own or with a group we can accomplish the mission(s) that God calls us to do on his behalf. We each know who we have built relationships with, and we know that it happens over time. We need to spend just as much time, if not more, in developing a relationship with Jesus. So, peace my friends as you discern the next step in deepening your relationship with God. Step out in faith and listen with your ears and heart. God has a wonderful adventure for you and him. Come and See.

Let us pray: *Dear Heavenly Father, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth. O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, instructs the hearts of the faithful, grant us that same Holy Spirit to be truly wise and ever rejoice in his consolation. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*



**Friday, December 24, 2021**

Text: Titus 2:11-14

*<sup>11</sup>For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, <sup>12</sup>training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, <sup>13</sup>while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. <sup>14</sup>He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.*

We are almost there; yes, Christmas is coming, the time that we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. It is the evening where Joseph and Mary settle down for the night in the stable. We patiently wait for the arrival of the Messiah, the One who will set us free. However, as those before us learned, our Savior did not come to fill our expectations. His will was that we should renounce impiety (the lack of reverence or devotion) and worldly passions. That we in the present live lives that are self-control, upright and godly while we wait for the hope and the manifestation of Jesus Christ. *(A manifestation is **the public display of emotion or feeling, or something theoretical made real.** Manifestation's origins are in religion and spirituality because if something spiritual becomes real, it is said to be a manifestation. The word's usage has spread to include all aspects of life.)*

Jesus came to give us salvation, to pay for our sins with his blood, so that we could be redeemed from all iniquity and be purified as his people who would be zealous for good deeds on his behalf. It took Jesus only a short 33 years to bring us the Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth (BIBLE). It takes us a lifetime to continually grow into the disciples he hopes we will become.

Let us pray: *Dear Heavenly Father, may we all take this time to consider our journey through the past year and ask if we have been open to being zealous on behalf of you in promoting and accomplishing good deeds for your children and as your servants. May we look to the new year inserting ourselves into the family of God putting Jesus first, others second and ourselves last. Please help us with a change of heart (metanoia) to return to the fold and become active in service to God's ministry. We pray that there are family members who will become involved and help lead our congregations into the future with changes where they need to be and may those of us that are comfortable and apathetic about changes open our hearts to the future of what our ministries can look like to others. Amen*

*(Metanoia means a transformative change of heart especially a spiritual conversion.)*



**Saturday, December 25, 2021**

Text: John 1:1-5

***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”***

Jesus is born under the humblest of circumstances in a stable. Gentile wise men followed the star and came to worship Jesus and later, Gentiles make up most of the Christian world. We celebrate Jesus' birth on Christmas (which means Christ's Mass). No one really knows what day Jesus was born on or exactly what year, but what difference does that have on celebrating his life and his years spent on earth?

The Western Church based in Rome, in 336 A.D. chose December 25 to celebrate Christmas. The Eastern Church chose January 6 and that day was named Epiphany which means appearance. The twelve days between the two dates have become known as the 12 days of Christmas. It has been said that the song *The Twelve Days of Christmas* was a song written so that people would be able to celebrate the story of Christmas without the fear of being arrested.

Society has commercialized Christmas and each year the decorations seem to come out earlier and earlier. Children visit Santa with their wishlist of gifts that they want. Companies have parties with dinner, mementos, and drinking. Families gather for the exchange of gifts and spending time together. Do all the secular activities obscure the real meaning and reason for celebrating Christmas? My mother-in-law would always make a birthday cake for Jesus when we gathered at Christmas time as a reminder as to why we celebrate.

After this 2021 celebration, can we move forward into the next year with the decision to increase our participation in the life of the church, listening and answering God's call with the gifts and passion that he has given us to grow his kingdom? Can we move into 2022 with the goal of getting to know Jesus better through study of his word, through participation in worshipping him, to deliberately serve in his name in his mission field?

You are never too young or too old to answer the call to service on behalf of your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He will be with you always and nothing is impossible with his help. It seems we always can find the time to do what we want; can we find time to do what Jesus wants us to do for him? If we all do something, big or small, the number of active servants will surpass the 80/20 rule (where 80 percent of the people do 20 percent of the work and 80 percent of the work is done by 20 percent of the people).

Let us pray: *O Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that our hand is leading us, and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (ELW = page 317)*

