

Clergy of the ELDoNA, affiliated congregations and missions

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Salem Lutheran Church, Malone, TX

Rev. Jeffrey Ahonen

Good Shepherd L.C., Tony, WI; Apologia Lutheran Mission, Deer Park, WI; Peace L.C., Ironwood, MI; Pure Blessings Lutheran Church, Brandon, WI

Rev. Jerald Dulas

Sts. Peter & Paul L. C., Simpsonville, SC; All Saints Lutheran Mission, Myrtle Beach, SC; St. Michael & All Angels Lutheran Mission, Martinez, GA; St. Bartholomew Lutheran Mission, Fort Myers, FL; St. Luke Evangelical Lutheran Mission, UAC, Ormond Beach, FL

Rev. Douglas Handrich (Emeritus)

Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Peoria, IL

Rev. Kent Heimbigner

Charity Lutheran Church, Burleson, TX

Rev. Benjamin Henson

Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Peoria, IL

Rev. Michael Henson

Trinity Lutheran Church, Herrin, IL

Rev. Martin Jackson

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Rev. Mark Mueller

Redeemer Lutheran Church, Cambridge, MN

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Rev. Josiah Scheck

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Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Harrison, AR; Emmanuel Lutheran Mission, Conway, AR

Rev. Timothy Tolar

St. Luke Lutheran Church, Kenai, AK
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Rev. Brandon Warr

St. Patrick Lutheran Church, Chipley, FL

Rev. Dcn. Gary Harroun

Trinity Lutheran Church, Herrin, IL

Rev. Dcn. Jacob Henson

St. Henry Lutheran Mission (WI and MI), especially Apologia Lutheran Mission, Deer Park, WI

Rev. Dcn. Anthony Oncken

Salem Lutheran Church, Malone, TX

Rev. Dcn. Floyd Smithey

Sts. Peter & Paul Lutheran Church, Simpsonville, SC; St. James Lutheran Mission, Knoxville, TN

Rev. Daniel Mensing

THE LUTHERAN HERALD



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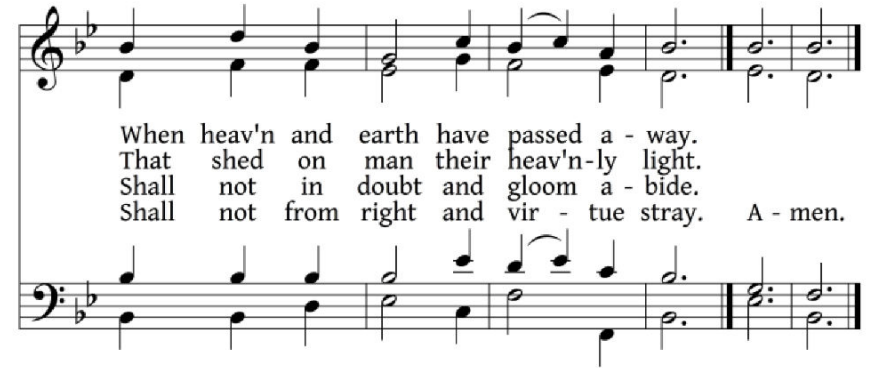
The Calendar

The Lutheran Hymnal (1941): TLH; 2022 Supplement: ASBH

(Monday: M; Tuesday: T; Wednesday: W; Thursday: R; Friday: F; Saturday: S)

Please note that hymn numbers for Festival Days reflect the enumeration of drafts of ASBH supplied at the most recent synods.

November 30	Advent 1/St. Andrew, Apostle	ASBH 1
December 6 (S)	St. Nicholas, Bishop & Confessor	ASBH 66
December 7	Advent 2/St. Ambrose, Bp. Confessor	ASBH 2/67
December 13 (S)	St. Lucy, Martyr	ASBH 68
December 14	Advent 3	ASBH 3
December 17 (W)	Ember Wednesday in Advent	
December 19 (F)	Ember Friday in Advent	
December 20 (S)	Ember Saturday in Advent	
December 21	Advent 4/St. Thomas, Apostle	ASBH 4
December 23 (T)	St. Thorlak, Bp. & Confessor	ASBH 70
December 24 (W)	Vigil of the Nativity	
December 25 (R)	Feast of the Holy Nativity	ASBH 5
December 26 (F)	St. Stephen, Martyr	ASBH 71
December 27 (S)	St. John, Apostle and Evangelist	ASBH 72
December 28	Christmas 1/Holy Innocents	ASBH 2



5. For faith and life, for thought and deed,
No other rule and guide we need;
When God the King proclaims His will
'Tis meet all others should be still.

6. To this alone may we adhere,
In faith and love and godly fear,
And ever walking by His Word,
Give glory to our Sovereign Lord.

St. Ignatius Lutheran Seminary

Winter Quarter begins December 8; the Christmas break begins on December 20. After Christmas break, classes resume January 5 and run through February 27. The classes offered in the winter quarter are as follows:

- E009—Greek Readings 2 (1 hr.)
- E003—Psalms (2 hrs.)
- H003—Medieval Church (3 hrs.)
- H009—Readings in Medieval Theology (1 hr.)
- P002—Catechetics (3 hrs.)

St. Ignatius currently has two students, Duncan Geldenhuys (Australia) and Jonathan Teo Zin Han (Singapore).

Festival of St. Ambrose
67. God Gave His Word by Holy Men

Rev. Matthias Loy, D. D., 1880

Arr. by Lowell Mason, Mus. Doc., 1832

1. God gave His Word by ho - ly men,
 2. It is not change - ful hu - man thought,
 3. It makes the way of faith so plain,
 4. It makes the path of du - ty clear,

The words dic - ta - ting to — their pen;
 That here to dark - ened souls is brought,
 That none in dark - ness need re - main;
 That all in this may per - se - vere;

That Word shall shine with glo - rious ray
 But ev - er - last - ing truth and right
 Who meek - ly choose it as their guide
 Who hum - bly heed its righ - teous way

Lesson from the Book of Concord First Sunday in Advent

Article VI.

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

—The Augsburg Confession

Part III, Article IV. Of the Gospel

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

—The Smalcald Articles

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

“And this is the name by which she will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.” If you are confused by this verse, perhaps it will help to remember that many women throughout history have been called by the names of men, specifically the name of their husbands. The marriage between husband and wife is a picture of the union between Christ and the Church. When a woman takes on the last name of her husband this is a reflection of the fact that the Church is called by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. She and all her children receive Christ’s name through Holy Baptism. She is cleansed from all of her sins and Christ becomes her righteousness. So she is called the “One Holy Christian Church.”

In Old Testament times, the Church was often referred to as “Judah” or “Jerusalem” or “Zion,” because the promises about David’s Seed were tied to that specific place. But since Jesus entered into Jerusalem as King and High Priest and has fulfilled those promises, His presence is no longer tied to any one geographical location. Instead, we find Him and His righteousness wherever His Word is being faithfully preached and His Sacraments are being rightly administered. That is where the Church is, who is called by His name.

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

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” writes St. Paul, “who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.” Before the foundation of the world, before sin, before time itself, God the Father chose His Church in His Son. Election is not a cold decree, but the eternal act of divine love. Christ is the Lamb foreordained for our redemption, and in Him the Father has made us His children by adoption.

This means your salvation is not an accident, nor is it the result of your decision or worthiness. It is anchored in the eternal will of God, accomplished by the blood of Christ, and sealed by the Spirit. The Gospel reveals that from all eternity God purposed to make sinners His saints, to turn the lost into heirs, to bring those dead in trespasses into life.

In the face of doubt, temptation, or the devil’s accusations, we cling to this truth: “He chose us in Him.” Not because of what we have done, but because of who He is—merciful, faithful, unchanging. The same Lord who chose you before time and brought you to faith will keep you unto eternity.

Collect: Almighty and Everlasting God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the name of Thy beloved Son we may be made to abound in good works; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Before faith came, we were prisoners under the Law, condemned by its righteous demands. The Law served as our tutor, showing our sin and pointing to the promise of Christ. But when faith has come, we are no longer under the tutor. In Baptism, we are clothed with Christ Himself—covered with His righteousness and united to His death and resurrection.

This is no mere symbol. To be baptized into Christ is to be adopted into His family. The Law divides; the Gospel unites. Regarding salvation, there is no Jew or Greek, bond or free, male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus. The garments of our sin are stripped away, and the robe of His righteousness is laid upon us. Baptism makes us heirs according to promise, not by the merit of our faith but by the grace of the One who gave it.

Every morning the baptized child of God can say, “I am clothed with Christ. My guilt is buried in His death, and my life is hidden in His resurrection.” This garment does not wear thin with time, nor can it be soiled by sin, for it is continually cleansed by the Word of forgiveness.

Collect: Almighty and Everlasting God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the name of Thy beloved Son we may be made to abound in good works; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Greek grammar does not indicate whether “the Son of His love” means “the Son whom He loves” or “the Son who is the manifestation of His love.” From the rest of Scripture and the context of today’s reading we can conclude that both are true and that the Holy Ghost wants us to understand that neither can be separated from the other.

It is most certainly true that Jesus is the Son whom God the Father loves, for His voice announced from out of the cloud at His Baptism and His Transfiguration, “This is My Beloved Son” (Matt. 3:17 and 17:5). And St. Paul says, “it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell.” God’s great love resulted in the Son’s divine nature being personally united with His human nature, being full of divine power, glory, and honor, to accomplish our redemption.

It is most certainly true that the Son of God is the manifestation of the Father’s love toward us men. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). St. Paul says that the Father’s love for us caused His Son to take on our flesh so that by His bloody death upon the cross He might redeem us from the power of darkness and reconcile us to Himself through the forgiveness of our sins.

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

The crowds welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem as their King. Indeed He was their King, and He is our King. At that time, however, Jesus was not entering into Jerusalem to exercise all His kingly might and authority. He came as High Priest to make a sacrifice. He would sacrifice Himself upon the cross, which was the only sacrifice capable of taking away our sin and making us acceptable to God the Father.

The author of Hebrews says that, because of Christ's work as our High Priest, now we may have boldness to enter the Holiest, that is, to enter into the presence of the most holy God. He says that we do this in full assurance of faith, having been washed with pure water, by the blood of Jesus and through His flesh. The holy presence of God is in His Word, Baptism, and Lord's Supper, which are found in the Divine Service.

For this reason it is necessary to go to church, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together. In the Divine Service we boldly enter the presence of the Holiest God through Jesus, who is true man and true God. Christ is wherever two or three are gathered in His name, observing His Word, receiving His Sacraments, and encouraging one another in faith, love, and good works.

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

On the eighth day, the Holy Child is circumcised and given the name spoken by the angel before His conception—Jesus, meaning “The Lord saves.” His first blood is shed not for sin of His own, but as the sign that He has taken our place under the Law. From His infancy He begins the obedience that will lead to Calvary. The One who gave the covenant to Abraham now bears its mark in His flesh.

Here the mystery of His humility unfolds. The eternal Son of God submits to the cutting of the knife, bearing the very Law He Himself authored. What is painful and humbling is holy because of Him, for in that shedding of blood He consecrated those who would trust in His name. His circumcision prefigures the cross, where the old Adam will be cut away. Through Baptism, the true circumcision of the heart, we are joined to Him and receive His name upon us. The name of Jesus is the power of salvation, the confession of faith, the comfort of sinners, and the joy of the redeemed. In that name we live, and in that name we die.

Collect: O merciful and eternal God, heavenly Father, who didst cause Thy Son to endure circumcision and to be made subject to the Law, that we might be redeemed from the curse of the Law: We beseech Thee, grant us grace to become partakers of this redemption and thus obtain eternal salvation; through the same, Thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, one true God, world without end. Amen.

Simeon had waited his whole life for this hour. The Holy Ghost had revealed to him that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Guided by the Spirit, he comes to the temple as the Child is brought in. Taking the infant in his arms, he blesses God: "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word: for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation."

The old man sees with faith what the world overlooks. The salvation of Israel is no longer a distant promise but a living reality, wrapped in the weakness of flesh. The Light to lighten the Gentiles is small enough to rest in trembling hands. The glory of Israel lies not in power or empires, but in this Child who will bear sin and conquer death. Simeon's song, the *Nunc Dimittis*, becomes the Church's hymn of peace—the confession of all who depart this life trusting in Christ.

As one year ends and another begins, we join Simeon's praise. Our eyes, too, have seen His salvation—not by sight, but by faith, in the Word and Sacraments. We may face the new year with peace, for the same Christ who came to Simeon comes to us in His Means of Grace.

Collect: Almighty and Everlasting God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the name of Thy beloved Son we may be made to abound in good works; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

When David's son Solomon died, Rehoboam became king. Rehoboam decided to follow the counsel of his young advisors who told him, "Thus you should speak to this people who have spoken to you, saying, 'Your father made our yoke heavy, but you make it lighter on us'—thus you shall say to them: 'My little finger shall be thicker than my father's waist!'" (1 Kings 12:10). This, in part, is what led to the rebellion of the northern tribes and the schism between God's people into two kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

Another Son of David, our Lord Jesus Christ, promises something different to the subjects of His kingdom: "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." Truly, He frees us from the unbearable yoke of the Law by taking it upon Himself, and He has given us rest in the Gospel.

Unlike Rehoboam's harsh laws which divided the Israelites, the gentleness of Christ's Gospel unites all of His people into one Church. All men are invited to believe the Word and receive the Sacraments in true faith, by which they will obtain rest for their guilty consciences and knowledge that the Father is pleased with them for the sake of His beloved Son. Wherever this pure Gospel is preserved, there the unity of the Church is also preserved.

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

The Pharisees were gravely mistaken. They were eagerly expecting the kingdom of God to be a political, earthly kingdom, one that they could observe with their eyes. They wanted to see their enemies defeated and themselves glorified. Today, there are those who have a similar mistaken hope for a thousand-year earthly reign of Christ and His Church before the Last Day.

Jesus corrects them by stating that “the kingdom of God is within you.” This is also often misunderstood. Some, when they read this, conclude that the Church is completely invisible and that no man can tell where the true Church is. But Jesus says no such thing. Our Augsburg Confession correctly defines the Church as “the congregation of all believers, among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity, and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel” (AC VII). We do not look within ourselves to find the Church, we look for the pure Gospel and Sacraments.

The effect of the Gospel and Sacrament, however, is within us. Through these means, Christ comes to us and His Spirit creates true fear, love, and trust in God within our hearts. He frees our souls from bondage to the devil and brings us into His kingdom.

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

When the days of Mary’s purification were accomplished, she and Joseph brought the Child to Jerusalem to present Him before the Lord. The Law required that every firstborn male be redeemed by sacrifice, for the first fruits belonged to God. The Redeemer was brought as if He needed redemption, yet He was the Lord Himself. He would be the holy sacrifice for our sin, so it was fitting that all righteousness was fulfilled throughout His life. His parents offered a pair of turtledoves—the humble sacrifice permitted for the poor. The rich and the mighty may boast in golden offerings, but the Lord delights in obedience and faith.

Already, the mystery of the Gospel shines forth: the Son who is holy by nature submits to the Law that condemns sinners. He takes our place under the very ordinances that reveal our guilt. The child in Mary’s arms is the true Temple, and yet He enters the temple to fulfill what His people could never keep. Thus, even His earliest days proclaim His purpose—to redeem those under the Law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

We learn that Christ’s glory was not found in splendor, but in humility; not in what man gives to God, but in what God gives to man. The Redeemer is carried to the altar that He might one day be the Sacrifice.

Collect: Almighty and Everlasting God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the name of Thy beloved Son we may be made to abound in good works; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Herod's rage turns Bethlehem into a place of sorrow. The Magi's visit of worship ended and the soldiers marched to slay the sons of Rachel. Matthew reminds us this fulfilled the prophet's words: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning." The earthly king of the Jews feared a rival and drew his sword against infants. But the true King—humble and hidden—is borne to Egypt, the place of Israel's ancient bondage. The Redeemer begins His earthly life in exile that He might later call us out of the bondage of sin and death.

The slaughtered children of Bethlehem and all its districts are martyrs for Jesus Christ, though they never spoke His Name. Their blood is a dreadful sign of the world's hatred toward the Incarnate Word. Yet, even their deaths are gathered into His Gospel; the One whom they die for will soon die for them. The Son of God bears our affliction and turns the world's cruelty into the cradle of redemption.

The promises of His Word are sure and true. The faithful people of God have the assurance of consolation and deliverance. In Him, death becomes the gate to everlasting life.

Collect: Almighty and Everlasting God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the name of Thy beloved Son we may be made to abound in good works; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Just as the master of the servants in the parable traveled to a far country, so our Master, Jesus Christ, has departed and ascended into heaven. Unlike a normal traveler, however, Jesus is not absent from us. He has given us His Spirit, Word, and Sacraments, through which He Himself remains graciously with us to forgive our sins and preserve us from all evil.

He has also given us various gifts, each according to one's own ability. St. Nicholas was given both great wealth and skills that were useful for the Office of the Ministry. He used these things faithfully; his money to provide for the poor, and his abilities as a bishop in the Church, defending the truth from the attacks of heretics.

When Jesus returns on the Last Day He will settle accounts with all of His servants. Knowing that we have sinned and misused His possessions, we should repent and put our faith in His merits, so that we are accounted righteous in His sight. And knowing that we are righteous by faith, we should strive to fulfill His will as good and faithful servants over whatever He has entrusted to our care.

Collect: O Lord, hear our prayers to Thee on this day of St. Nicholas, Thy Confessor and Bishop, that, as Thou didst lead him to render faithful service to Thee, Thou wouldst lead us to faithfully confess our hope in Thy salvation; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord Second Sunday in Advent

Article XVII.

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

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

—The Augsburg Confession

Lesson from the Book of Concord Sunday after ChristMass

Chapter XIII.

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

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

It is a strange passage of Scripture. Our Lord may be hinting that John would live a very long life, the only one of the original Apostles who did not die a martyr's death. His life would instead be something of a living martyrdom; not sacrificed in a moment, but a long process of sacrificing all his days and years under persecution in service to the Lord who loved him.

We who are not overtly threatened with death on account of our faith may take John as a noble example of how to live our lives. Nevertheless, we do well to heed Jesus' words to Peter concerning John, as well. The Lord had His use for the life of John, and our lives will not be—cannot be—just like his. Whatever the Lord's will for John was, it is given to us to follow Jesus!

The “how to” is pretty simple: Repent of your sins. Trust in the Incarnate God, our Lord Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of our sins. And undertake to make the most of every opportunity to serve Christ with works that express love for our neighbor, in the day and age and place where the Lord has been pleased to place us.

Collect: Merciful Lord, we beseech Thee to cast the bright beams of Thy light upon Thy Church that it, being instructed by the doctrine of the blessed Apostles, may so walk in the light of Thy truth that it may at length attain to the light of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

In the Gospel text for this past Sunday our Lord said: “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.” If we wish to escape the coming judgment of God, we must be counted worthy to escape it. We must be reckoned as righteous, since the Son of Man is a righteous Judge.

However, lest we think that we can be counted worthy by doing works of the Law, St. Paul writes in today's text: “Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself ... do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?” We cannot escape the judgment of God by our works. Our works are sinful. They are self-seeking and disobedient. If we insist upon being judged by our works, we shall only treasure up for ourselves wrath in the day of the righteous judgment of God.

We Christians do not look to God as merely our Judge, but as our Redeemer. Instead of hardening our hearts and clinging to our works, we confess our sins and trust that we are counted worthy through faith in Jesus' redemption. On the Last Day we will “look up and lift up our heads,” not because our works are worthy, but because our Redeemer draws near (Luke 21:28, Gospel for Populus Sion).

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

When the saints of God encounter angels in the Holy Scriptures their first reaction is typically one of fear. Here, the Virgin Mary is no exception. When Gabriel enters into her house she is troubled, wondering why he had come. However, Gabriel assures her that he has brought good news. The Savior would be born to her. The Son of God would soon be conceived in her womb! Just as the prophets foretold, Jesus would be great and would bring salvation to all who believe in Him.

Just as this first coming of Christ was good news for Mary and all believers, so the second coming of Christ is good news for us! While it is true that He will come to judge the living and the dead and “will render to each one according to his deeds” (Romans 2:6), believers can expect salvation. They can expect the gift of eternal life because they are justified by faith. They will not be judged by their sinful works, but by the righteous works of Jesus Christ who died for their sins.

We can rejoice at Jesus’ coming, for our redemption draws near! The Son of God will rescue us from this vale of tears and bring us to the unspeakable joys of His heavenly kingdom. There He “will reign over the house of Jacob forever, of His kingdom there will be no end.”

Collect: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Thine only-begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve Thee with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her!”

Christ is born! For many, Christmas is a day of giving presents, getting together with family, and eating big meals. It can feel quite “warm and fuzzy.” But in the second, third, and fourth days of Christmas the Church throws some ‘cold water’ on that. We remember St. Stephen (martyr in both will and deed), St. John the Apostle (martyr in will), and then the Holy Innocents (martyrs in deed, but not in will). We remember that people will suffer and die on account of the Newborn King.

Today we remember St. Stephen, the first martyr of the New Testament Church. He was martyred for telling the truth that throughout Israel’s history they had indeed killed the prophets and stoned those sent to them. For testifying to the truth of the holy, saving work of Jesus Christ, sure enough, they stoned Stephen too. His last words confessed his faith: “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” May God grant us also to be such faithful witnesses to Christ Jesus, and to do so no matter what the cost.

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

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 25: TITUS 2:11–14 FEAST OF THE NATIVITY

“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.”

In sending Christ into this world, God has caused His saving grace to be made visible, to be made incarnate! Our Epistle for this Christmas morning goes on to speak of how that changes us, as we seek purity and put away ungodliness and evil lusts. It sounds like Law, and yet, grace and salvation through faith in Christ are the starting point.

How often do we hear someone seek to justify their foibles, or even their blatant sins, by saying, “I’m only human!” But that’s not our problem. Our problem is that we are *fallen* humans, less than the holy, perfect creatures that God intended us to be. Christ is not born into this world to save us from being human. Christ has come to make *real* human beings out of us again! So, as He assumes our flesh, He proceeds to lead a holy, sinless life on our behalf. He sacrifices that life for us, that He may clothe us in His righteousness. As recipients of that saving grace of God in Christ, we rejoice to strive to live up to the righteousness in which we have already been clothed, to live like complete human beings once again.

Collect: Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that the new birth of Thine Only-Begotten Son in the flesh may set us free who are held in the old bondage under the yoke of sin; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 10: 2 TIMOTHY 3:10–17 2ND S. IN ADVENT

In the Epistle lesson for last Sunday, St. Paul wrote: “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Romans 15:4). This is a description of the first use of Holy Scripture: to impart patience, comfort, and hope. Through the Gospel men are assured that they have a gracious God who forgives their sins and delivers from the devil and all evil.

In today’s lesson, St. Paul adds four other uses of Holy Scripture: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” These uses are equally important! The Holy Scriptures are useful for “doctrine”, that is, for teaching us the truth. The Scriptures are useful for “reproof”, that is, for keeping us away from error. The Scriptures are also useful for “correction”, that is, for directing us away from evil works. Finally, the Scriptures are useful for “instruction in righteousness”, that is, directing us toward doing good works.

The Scriptures are useful in all aspects of our faith. They are also useful in all stages of life. St. Paul urged Timothy, that same Word which he learned as a child is the Word which completes him as an adult and makes him prepared as a minister of Christ. May God so use His Word with us, that in all times of life we may be wise unto salvation and continue in those things which we have been taught.

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

Today's lesson is all about the Word of God, even though Peter does not use that specific phrase! The Word of God is what Peter refers to when he speaks about "knowledge". For divine knowledge comes to us through the Word. Through the Word we have knowledge of "our God and Savior Jesus Christ." Through the Word we are given "exceedingly great and precious promises" and made "partakers of the divine nature." Through the Word we learn that Jesus' divine power "has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness."

Peter is very concerned that we do not leave this Word of God behind. Once we are brought to faith in Christ and begin to bring forth fruits of faith, he urges us that we be diligent to add "knowledge" to these fruits. In other words, we should study and learn the Word of God! Remember (from yesterday's devotion) the five uses of Holy Scripture. The Scriptures are useful for comfort, for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness. If we wish to be fruitful in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, we must have the Word of God, since the Word of God is what teaches and produces these fruits. The Word, in its Law and Gospel, not only creates a living faith, but adds to this faith self-control, perseverance, godliness, and love.

Collect: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Thine only-begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve Thee with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

"When He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high."

Our Lord, the second person of the Holy Trinity, the Eternal Word, assumed our humanity. Tonight, and tomorrow especially, we celebrate this. There are some who misunderstand: they think God and man are irreconcilably separated. But the one true God has become man, and by that He fixes everything necessary for salvation. Tonight we celebrate that God has become man. He lived a holy life in our place, and died in our place on the cross, for us to be saved.

He did all that, and now, it is done. In the old Jewish temple a number of priests would stand in line, each in his turn offering someone's sacrifice. Then they would go get another animal, get back in line, and wait to sacrifice again. After Jesus purged our sin by His sacrifice He sat down! The sacrificing was done, and Jesus assumed His place at the right hand of the Father, with all authority in heaven and on earth.

Tonight we celebrate the story of our Savior's incarnation. God grant us grace to follow it all the way through to the cross, to the resurrection of our Lord, and finally to His ascension and session at the right hand of God.

Collect: O God, who has made this most holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light: Grant, we beseech Thee, that as we have known on earth the mysteries of that Light, we may also come to the fullness of His joys in heaven; who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

“Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

Thorlak Thorhallsson lived from 1133 to 1193. He was consecrated as a deacon at age 15, was ordained a priest at age 18, became the bishop of Skalholt in southern Iceland, and eventually became archbishop of Nidaros, a city in Norway (now Trondheim). He studied for a time in Paris, and founded the first Augustinian monastery in Iceland.

Christianity had come to Iceland as early as 795, but only became the official religion of Iceland in 1000. So, when St. Thorlak was alive, Christianity had only been the religion of the land for a short time. There was much work to be done in service of the Lord.

We saw in yesterday’s devotion the three reasons we revere departed saints: we thank God for saving them through faith in Christ, we thank God for all that He accomplished through them, and we look to them as examples for us. Likewise, we are thankful that God saved St. Thorlak; we rejoice in all that God accomplished through him, particularly for the Icelandic and Norwegian people; and we pray God give us zeal in service to Christ, as He did for this saint.

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

Paul and his fellow ministers faced much persecution in their travels. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles, it seems that they encountered opposition to the Word everywhere they went—even from those professed to be God’s people. For this reason Paul asked the Thessalonians to pray for him and his companions. In order for the Word to run swiftly in their ministry, they needed the blessing and protection of God.

Pastors today need our prayers too. Every pastor, in his ministry, will encounter opposition to the Word. Sometimes it will be from those outside the church walls, but too often it is from those on the inside. Not all have faith, and so some cause trouble for faithful pastors who proclaim the pure Word of God.

Paul assures us that God will answer these prayers. He will protect his ministers and glorify His Word, just as He promised; since “the Lord is faithful.” Moreover, when God preserves pastors and upholds His Word, all the saints are benefited! Through the preaching of faithful men we are established by God (as Paul says) and guarded from the evil one. May God grant us confidence in His faithfulness, that He will do this very thing for us and for our pastors, just as He did for Paul and the Thessalonians.

Collect: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Thine only-begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve Thee with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

St. Lucy is an example of faith, especially for young women. According to historical accounts, she lived in Sicily at the turn of the 4th century. She was raised by her mother (her father passed away when she was five), and she died at a young age under a vow of virginity. During the persecutions of Emperor Diocletian (A.D. 303-305) she was martyred for the faith, refusing to comply with the demands of un-Christian men.

In our day and age the faithful Church goes to great lengths to defend motherhood, since the world vehemently opposes this divine estate and promotes ‘feminism’ in its place. However, the example of St. Lucy reminds us that virginity is also a godly estate—provided that it is lived in spiritual chastity. St. Paul writes in today’s lesson (and the verses following) that all Christians should be like chaste virgins, being uncorrupted by the craftiness and deceit of the devil.

If you are an unmarried young woman, recall St. Lucy and remember that your vocation is pleasing to God. As Paul says: “The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit” (1 Cor. 7:34). However, if you desire to be married, you desire a good thing! Commend yourself to God and He will take care of all your needs. In the meantime, follow St. Lucy in faith and be not corrupted by the pressures of the world and the devil.

Collect: O God, our Savior, hear us, we pray Thee, as we rejoice in the steadfast devotion Thou dost kindle and sustain in the hearts of Thy saints, through our Lord, Jesus Christ, who livest and reignest with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

“Henceforth all generations will call me blessed.”

St. Luke is the Gospel that gives us historic canticles. Our text for today is Mary’s hymn, rejoicing in God’s gracious selection of her to be the mother of our Lord. She makes this bold declaration that “henceforth all generations will call me blessed.” Indeed, we do, to this day, refer to “the blessed Virgin Mary.” The faithful Church has always revered St. Mary very highly.

Have there been abuses? Absolutely. Against some of these our Lutheran Confessions clarify the matter. We do not invoke the saints. Rather, our reverence is threefold: we thank God that He saved them by grace; we thank God for all the good He has accomplished in this world through them; and we embrace them as examples of faithfulness, especially where their example pertains to us.

And so we do with Mary. We rejoice that she rejoiced in “God my Savior.” We rejoice that she was a faithful mother to Christ our Lord. We can all seek to emulate her faithful submission to the Lord; as she said, “Let it be to me according to your word.” And particularly, she serves as an example to women who have received the gift of motherhood.

Collect: Stir up, O Lord, we beseech Thee, Thy power, and come, and with great might succor us, that by the help of Thy grace whatsoever is hindered by our sins may be speedily accomplished through Thy mercy and satisfaction; who livest and reignest with the Father, and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Article IX.

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

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

—The Augsburg Confession

V. Of Baptism.

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

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

—The Smalcald Articles, Part III.

Lesson from the Book of Concord

Third Sunday in Advent

Article V.

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

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

—The Augsburg Confession

Article XVI.

Of Political Order.

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

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

Luke begins his Gospel talking about the certainty we need in the Word that was delivered to us; the Divine Word, which is the source of our instruction. Then we hear about how an angel brings a Word from God to Zacharias and Elizabeth. This is an interesting story, as it seems to echo so many stories of the Old Testament, especially the promise of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah.

The parallels to the Old Testament are not accidental. Zacharias and Elizabeth are representatives of the faithful remnant of God's Old Testament people. It is not accidental that Luke is setting this story in the temple, in Jerusalem. The old systems are passing away. With the birth of John, and ultimately Jesus, we see the new heavenly kingdom breaking forth. The end times are soon to break upon the world. John is to be the forerunner of the Alpha and Omega. John's name means "God is gracious." The new people of God will be defined by grace, not law.

God will create life in the midst of Elizabeth's dead womb. God will bring life to His wandering people out of pure grace. God's grace is not moved by men's efforts. He gives grace and life by His own power. John is the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of those who will believe in the incarnate Christ.

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

There have always been problems with enthusiasts and false teachers who wish to mislead the faithful about the return of Christ. Here the Thessalonians were being confused by certain people who had told them that Christ had already come and they missed it. The Apostle warns them not to be deceived by spirit, or word, or letter.

All Christians can know the truth by the writings and testimony of the Apostles themselves in the Bible. But there is never an end to those who claim direct inspiration by the Holy Spirit for their own misinterpretations or their new 'revelations'. Some Anabaptists predicted the second advent of Christ would be in 1533. William Miller predicted Jesus' return on three different dates in 1844. Ellen G. White falsely predicted Christ's return more than half a century ago. There have been any number of people over the last fifty years who have predicted one date or another.

We do not predict dates. We patiently wait on the Lord's time for His second advent. We do not seek out ecstatic experiences. We do not seek to see God on our terms. We hear God and we listen to no other voice than the one we hear in Scripture. Our Advent season is about repentance, patience, and trust in Christ's grace.

Collect: O God, who seest that we are afflicted because of our iniquity, mercifully grant that we may be comforted by Thy visitation; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Unlike the mighty Assyrian army, the house (or stump) of Jesse is small and insignificant. However, God likes to make ‘something out of nothing.’ In His kingdom, strength is found in weakness. It is also important to remember that God repeatedly reminds us that it is He who creates life. God creates life where there is none. He creates Adam from the dead dust of the ground. He creates believers from those who are spiritually dead, and he brings the Messiah out of the dead house or stump of David.

The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost bring life where there is no life. And unlike the rulers of this world, this “Branch” from “the stem of Jesse” shall be a perfect ruler. He shall administer Law and Gospel perfectly. In this world, the weak are allowed to suffer even more if their lives do not serve the interests of worldly rulers. We see so many examples of rulers using their subjects to benefit themselves. Such worldly rulers pervert justice and ignore mercy. But in the Messiah’s kingdom, the Law is meted out to the wicked, and the poor and weak are healed and protected.

When we are discouraged by the injustice in this world, we must remember that the Babe that comes to us at Christmas is also the perfect Ruler of heaven and earth. He will right all wrongs. He will judge rightly and will bring perfect healing and life to those who put their trust in Him.

Collect: Stir up Thy might, we beseech Thee, O Lord, and come, that they who trust in Thy loving kindness may be the more speedily freed from all adversity; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

It was on the eighth day that John would be brought to be circumcised and given his name. Again, it is fitting that it was on the eighth day that the Old Testament people of God entered into their covenant relationship with God. This foreshadows the eighth day of Christ’s resurrection that brings about a new relationship. As Jesus said: “Behold, I make all things new.”

Zacharias’ sudden muteness and recovery of speech are supernatural signs that this was a special moment in history, and his son would be a special servant of God. But it also tells us something about faith in God’s Word. Back in verse 13, the angel announced the gift of a son, and said the boy’s name would be John. In verse 18, Zacharias doubts the word the angel brought him. When he submits in faith to God’s word of promise in verse 63, his speech is restored.

We exert our will through the power of speech, but we only speak rightly when we submit ourselves to God’s will. It is His Word that makes us righteous. It is God’s Word that is the powerful life-force that heals us and makes us whole. When Zacharias expressed his faith, he could once again audibly praise the God who gave him the power of speech.

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

“In the latter days” is a phrase that means the time of the Messianic age. Not only does it refer to the time of Christ’s second coming, but, as we learned from Acts, chapter two, the Messianic age is already here in many ways with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

“The mountain of the Lord’s house” refers to Mount Zion, and therefore, the temple. But we also recognize that Zion ultimately refers to the Church, God’s holy people. The saints are the new people of God, and the Church is the new temple, the new Zion. So, when Isaiah says that “all nations shall flow to it,” he means that all nations shall enter the Church. Through the Church, God’s kingdom breaks forth into the world. All peoples, from around the world, are drawn to the Holy Christian Church; and then they go out and bring the Gospel with them to the four corners of the earth.

What other interpretation could there be of Isaiah’s prophecy? Modern Israel is an earthly government; it is not the Church of God’s people. Judaism does not offer the grace of the Messiah; it offers relics of the old broken temple. The house of Jacob is called to repent and walk in the light of the Lord. That Light is Jesus Christ, who has fulfilled the promises of the prophets and teaches all nations to love the Father in sincerity and truth because of His Gospel.

Collect: Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that with the coming solemnity of our Lord’s birth to accomplish our redemption, through Thy holy Word and Sacraments Thou would strengthen our faith in Christ Jesus; who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” John the Baptist is a witness. He can say, ‘I was there, I saw it, it’s true; God has come to men to lead them to truth and life, to lead them home to Himself.’ John tells his followers his testimony, and they go to see this revelation for themselves. As they follow Jesus through His life, they see the miracles, hear His words, and they become witnesses to the truth as well.

Every important story needs reliable witnesses. Did what was claimed actually happen? Without truthful and reliable witnesses, a story is not worth believing. So, John the Baptist is a witness, and testifies that the Man walking in front of him is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is the truth, that God became a man. This was the Lamb that would take all of the sin of the world onto Himself and be sacrificed to satisfy God’s justice.

In the Divine Service, when we sing the Agnus Dei, we confess that we meet this Lamb of God in the Holy Eucharist we are about to receive. It’s as if we are John’s disciples, standing with him as he points us to the Savior. Today, he is pointing us to Jesus who is at the altar. It is there we find Him and the life we seek.

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