

Sundays of Advent & Christmas

2025-26 Messages

From Pastor Norman Staker

Bethel Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Russell, Kentucky

Sundays of Advent

First Sunday In Advent – Nov. 30 – *“What Child Is This?”*
Second Sunday In Advent – Dec. 7 – *“The Lumberjack God”*
Third Sunday In Advent – Dec. 14 – *“Like Waldo I’m In The Crowd”*
Fourth Sunday In Advent – Dec. 21 – *“Lift Us To The Joy Divine”* From Sylvia Gardener

Sundays of Christmas

Nativity of Our Lord Sunday (*Christmas Eve*)– Dec. 24 –
“Nothing Will Ever Be The Same Again”
Christmas Day – Dec. 25 – No Service
First Sunday In – Dec. 28 – *“When Christmas Isn’t Picture Perfect”*
New Years Eve – Dec. 31 – No Service
New Years Day – Jan. 1 – No Service
Second Sunday In – Jan. 4 – *“Glimpse The Divine Light”*

“WHAT CHILD IS THIS?”

Message for the First Sunday in Advent

From Pastor Norman Staker

November 30, 2025

ISAIAH 2: 1-5 ** ROMANS 13: 11-14 ** MATTHEW 24: 36-44

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED.

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man. Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

Do you believe that Jesus will one day come back from where he has gone? Do you believe that there is actually going to be a point of time in our history, or better: in our future, when God will intervene in the flow of history in a way that will have a cosmic impact? Let’s have a show of hands: Who believes in the second coming of Jesus?

Let me ask you another question: Do you believe that Jesus could actually return during your lifetime—anywhere between today and some dozens of years from now? Who of you believes, that we could actually witness the second coming of Jesus while we are still alive?

One more question, and then you can sit back and relax. If you believe that Jesus is coming back and that that could be any time soon, how does that affect your feelings and emotions, your stress levels, your choices, and your behavior: the way you use your time, your money, and your resources? Think of that for a while: Does the thought of Jesus coming back soon have any impact on your life as you live it today? And I mean: real impact!

Well, I don't know what your answer is to that last question. What I do know is this. Christians react very differently to the idea of Jesus' second coming.

There have always been people with a strong sense of urgency about this. Many revival movements throughout the history of the church have brought this urgency to the surface. Their message has been pretty much the same as that of John the Baptist and Jesus: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!"

Today we begin to prepare ourselves for the celebration of Jesus' coming. As we prepare, we don't talk about how many shopping days are left. We don't frantically review our lists; we don't look at our calendar and gasp. No, we take a deep breath, and believe it or not, we relax. Yes, we relax. Advent is a time when we need some space, some quiet time.

How many of you have gotten all your Christmas shopping done already, not part of it but all of it? Hey, don't look at me like that! I heard about a lady who always tries to get her Christmas shopping done before Advent begins, so she can focus her attention on the spiritual meaning of the season during these weeks. For most of us, including myself, it's already too late to get our shopping done before Advent begins; Advent is already here! But, there's hope; we can still take time to set aside some space in our schedule for quiet, for reflection, for prayer, and for reading the scriptures.

If you want to drive your family crazy and especially your wife, I did it a couple of times with Joyce, but you call home from somewhere and tell the spouse or whoever answers the phone, to get ready because someone is coming to dinner; you don't take the time to tell them who, then you hang up. They don't know who is coming, or when, whether it is someone important, or a relative, a good friend, a total stranger. There will be highs and lows until you walk in the door with this person.

This is Advent Sunday, the start of a new church year. It's the threshold of the Christmas season. It has the mystic beauty of the dawn of a new day, a new beginning, a morning when the world is made new. It is as the glory of a spiritual spring with its promise of summer.

So do the festive songs and the inspired Word on this Advent Sunday come as a promise of and a prelude to the Christmas joy. They herald His coming, and tell us of the advent of His kingdom, growing clearer and brighter as the great day comes

near, when the angel choirs shall blend their celestial harmonies with the voices of the children of men.

The Word of God today is a call to us to awake out of sleep, to get ourselves ready quite early. It is not the thunders of judgment that we hear today. It is not the noisy clanging of an alarm clock. It is more like the bird songs of the dawn, God's wonderful chorus awakening the sleeper with gentleness and beauty.

There are many who are not awakened by these notes. They sleep, until the louder, startling calls come. And so today there are many who are not fully awake, who fail to catch the beauty of the dawn.

The call will become louder. Next Sunday there will be thunder and flashes of lightning in the preached word, when the Lord tells us that the powers of heaven shall be shaken. But even that will be the call of love, of divine grace, prompting us to respond in joyous song.

A few moments ago, we lit the first candle on the Advent wreath, the candle of peace, as a signal that someone is coming and we have 4 weeks to get ready. But ready for who?? Who is coming?? Our first item of business this Advent season is to answer the question posed by one of my favorite hymns: "What Child is this, Who laid to rest; On Mary 's lap is sleeping?"

What child is this who is coming? What does he mean for us?? How will we accept him?? Does he get confused with someone else's coming? I would imagine if we ask our children who is coming they might answer with another song that is sung often during this Advent season: "You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why. Santa Claus is coming to town!! He knows when you've been sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows when you've been bad or good. So be good for goodness sake!"

During the next four Sundays of Advent, we will answer this question, "What child is this?" who is coming into our midst at Christmas time.

Our gospel lesson and our first lesson tell us something of this child. It tells us that he is a judge. He will decide something about our fate. It is sort of funny, that the first Sunday of Advent, the first Sunday of the church year, has a text that looks at the end instead of the beginning.

Our gospel text and the text from the first lesson deal with the end of time, the time of God's final judgment upon the earth. But I think it is very appropriate for us to begin here, because as we learn about this child and his message for us, we will be more ready to accept this message and live in this message if we know the promise of his second coming.

We traditionally speak about this text as the second coming of Christ, but is that the correct terminology? Does this mean that Christ has not fully come into our world that we need a second coming?

The inherent problem with a phrase like Second Coming is that it carries the implication of not here yet. That phrase, 'second coming,' is not mentioned anywhere in the Bible.

----- But Jesus is not stuck in traffic.... The Redeemer of the world wasn't sent to us with the wrong zip code... delayed until the Postal Department gets their act together..... the Word of God is present in everything and everyone.... everywhere.... right now!

Advent isn't a season where we hang out for a while until Christmas happens... Advent is a season where we learn once again to be an expectant people..... a people who anticipate.... a people who read the signs....a people who look painstakingly for the invasion of Christmas everywhere! "

We don't know the time of that judgment. Some say that with all the terrorist activity we have experienced now, with the spread of Aids, with the so-called moral decline in our land, that the end is near. But is it?

The text says no one knows when, you cannot look at the signs around you to know when, but be ready.

What child is this? It is a child who comes now and is here now and will judge us when the final end of time comes upon us. There is joy as well as readiness, or watchfulness, in this coming.

What Child is this?? This child is one who will bring a judgment to the human race, as well as the hope and the promise of eternal salvation for those who are waiting and believing.

What Child is this? He is the child who comes now to bring us hope and salvation, and he will continue to come into this world until the final days when he will bring all creation under his domain and control.

We must trust in his promise of salvation for our time and for the future. We must trust and believe in that promise as we live in these in-between times. The times between his coming at Christmas and the time of the final judgment.

Trust and believe in this Child! What Child is this? This is the child that will help us believe and trust in His saving grace in our lives.

So what do we do now? What does one actually do in-between times? In-between the first coming and the second coming? Jesus tells us simply to be ready. I say the only way to be ready is to celebrate a 1-1/2 coming Advent. You heard me! A 1-1/2 coming Advent! A coming that occurs in-between, where Jesus arrives in our lives right Now!

I'm not going to await the coming of the birth of Jesus—He's already come!

I'm not going to anticipate the death of Christ for my sin—He's already washed me clean!

I'm not going to look forward to a time where He rises from the grave—He is risen indeed!

I'm sure not going to waste my time pondering the Second Coming, because Jesus tells us only God knows when that is going to happen.

All I do is try to get ready by spending my time celebrating the fact that Jesus offers to come into my life on a daily basis. That's why I have no problem with decorating the church or singing Christmas songs during Advent. We need to celebrate and never cease preparing for the coming of Jesus every single day of the week.

We live our lives in-between the first coming and the second coming. The first Advent where God takes care of your past—washing away your countless sins. The second Advent where God takes care of your future—promising life everlasting. The only thing left to do is celebrate the 1-1/2 Advent or the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in-between!

When Jesus comes into your life today, you will know how to act at home, at school, at work.

When Jesus comes into your life today, you will know your mission and purpose in this lamp stand of God.

When Jesus comes into your life today, the in-between times will be the best times of your life on earth—not regretting the past, cherishing today and looking forward to every tomorrow.

When Jesus comes into your life today he will give you something to look forward to—something to dream about—you know something to keep us going.

When Jesus comes into your life today, there will be only one thing to do in-between times and that is to get ready!

We are called right now to hope; to cast aside our cynicism and despair, to embrace the hopeful vision of Isaiah, to let it touch our lives right here, right now, as we finish our November and look forward to December. We do so even as we look forward to a day, God only knows what day, when it will fully be realized among us and among all people. About that day and hour no one knows, but when it comes nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Amen!!

“THE LUMBERJACK GOD”

Message for the Second Sunday in Advent

From Pastor Norman Staker

December 7, 2025

ISAIAH 11: 1-10 ** ROMANS 15: 4-13 ** MATTHEW 3: 1-12

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight. He is risen; he is risen indeed!!

“Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waste, and his food was locusts and wild honey.”

Imagine you hear a knock on the door. You check the peephole and don’t like what or who’s on the other side. Normally you wouldn’t even think about opening the door but your husband is there and says, ‘Well see what he has to say but don’t let him in. You slowly open your door. ‘Hi ma’am, my name is John. I haven’t eaten in days; could I trouble for some locusts and wild honey; my favorites? Locusts and wild honey; I’m sorry but I don’t’ have anything like that. Try the local Lutheran church down the road.’ And off he goes. ‘Whew, that was a close one; probably a murderer dressed in strange clothes. And who eats locusts and wild honey?’

Your son or daughter comes home from college with an uninvited guest. Mom/Dad, I want you to meet my new friend John. He’s hungry! You look at John, then your son or daughter and tell them ‘Now is not a good time.’ What else do you say; I don’t like his looks. He needs a bath and some clean clothes. But you ease up; what would he want to eat? He eats locusts and wild honey. I don’t have any locusts; would he eat cicadas? I canned some last spring when they were really popular! You canned some cicadas; you took the time to cook them and put them in jars and seal them! Why? Who cans locusts let alone cicadas? You never know when you’ll need some freshly canned cicadas. Besides, they don’t sell them at FoodFair or Kroger.

Ok, rather far fetched aren’t they or are they?

He was a rare man. He was an unusual man. It is not every one who is reared in an orphanage out in the desert with very little contact with human civilization or the city. Not every one is reared without a mother or father, without brothers or sisters. Not every one is reared by a group of old men in a monastery out in the desert far away from the city. Of course, he would turn out a little strange. Wouldn't you? He was a very unusual man.

It's not every one whose childhood toys were lizards and scorpions, snakes and giant sand spiders, who talked with cacti in the morning and counted the stars at night and whose world was a gigantic sandbox all day long. Of course, he would turn out a little strange, wouldn't you? He was a very unusual man.

It is not every one who grows up alone, so very alone in the quietness of the desert. Alone with the gods of the desert. Alone with the sounds of winds and shifting sands. Alone with the endless time of the desert, the endless nights and the endless days. Of course, he would turn out a little strange. Wouldn't you? He was a very unusual man.

His total life was entirely dedicated to God out there in the desert sands and all alone. What else was there to do in the desert? There are no games to play, no people to talk with, no scrolls to read. What else is there to do out in the desert, night after night, day after day, except talk with God? To be immersed in God.

Then, strangely, they started to come, first by the hundreds and then by the thousands. All these people came to hear him preach. Walking ten, twenty, thirty miles out from their cities, out into the wilderness, to listen to this desert prophet. I mean, that is a long way to walk for a sermon.

These people came out into the desert to hear him preach. Not because his sermons were racy, spicy or sophisticated. Not because of voluminous choirs or old favorite hymns. Not because they had some desire to see old friends that they hadn't seen all week. Not because of some childhood habit of being in the synagogue on Friday nights, a habit that they couldn't kick. No.

They left their cities and they walked twenty, thirty, or forty miles out into the desert because they wanted to see a rare phenomenon. They wanted to see a man who had been totally immersed in God, whose soul had not be corrupted by the pollution of the cities, whose personality had not been fouled by the carnivorousness of the city. They wanted to hear; they wanted to hear an authentic Word from the Lord.

They didn't want to be tantalized; they didn't come to be entertained; they didn't come to hear some fashionable religious wisdom. They came because they wanted to hear an authentic Word from the Lord for their lives.

And more than that, they sensed in this man was the powerful presence of God. The people from the city wanted to find what he found in the desert and what they were unable to find in the city or the cities of life. So these people came looking; they came looking for an authentic Godly life. They came searching to find what he had found in the desert.

The message of this desert prophet was essentially one word. Prepare. In the wilderness, prepare for the coming of the Christ. In the desert, prepared for the coming of the King. In the wilderness, be washed, be clean, be pure. Your imagination. Your heart. Your mind. May these be washed clean, so Christ can come into you and live.

Today is the day of John the Baptist. Today an invitation is given to you and me to prepare for the coming. To prepare for the coming of Christ. To prepare by going into the desert to be cleaned. One's heart. One's imagination. One's thoughts. It is only when one is cleaned in the desert that the Christ comes to live within.

The city. The city. How we love the city and how we are afraid of the desert. The city is a sumptuous buffet of turkey, fish and beef, with sugar coated corn flakes and sugar coated apples and sugar coated coffees with plastic covered dinners and plastic covered boxes and plastic covered bags. In the city they can go to the local Starbucks for an Iced Brown Sugar Oatmilk Shaken Espresso or French Roast even a Pumpkin Spice latte, so many choices. In the wilderness, if it's not cloudy, they can see the stars. At least these stars don't cost big bucks! Not even close to the same thing but much cheaper! The city dwellers eat sumptuously every morning, noon and night. How the city dwellers love the food of their fair cities. It's taste; it's variety; it's convenience; it's volume.

A voice cried out, "In the desert, prepare. In the desert, be cleaned." And then I heard a whisper, a voice speaking ever so softly: "He ate only locusts and wild honey. He ate so simply." Then another voice suddenly shouted out; "Is God really a loaf of bread or the Bread of Life?"

The city is magnificent cathedrals and skyscrapers, buildings of stone and steel, growing taller and taller and taller like the towers of Babel, pointing their fingers high into the sky. Buildings of tinted gray glass and shining bright aluminum,

rectangular, cylindrical, triangular, epitomized by the classic modern building, the Stadium. People love to walk beneath the grandeur of their great concrete cathedrals and see the skyline of the city of man.

A voice cried out, “In the wilderness, prepare for Christ to come in. In the wilderness, be washed, be cleansed. And another voice whispered ever so softly, “God’s tabernacle was only a tent. God lived in a tent.” And still another voice shouted a question so all the world could hear: “Is the dwelling place of God in a magnificent cathedral or in a tent made out of canvas?”

The city is technology; the mind is a machine; the cranium is a complex computer like you have never seen before. How they loved their computerized calculators, their computerized telephones, their computerized checking accounts, their computerized grocery stores. Nothing in the whole world knows so much as a computer. Nobody can answer so quickly as a godlike computer. The people themselves became computerized; marriages were computerized; babies were computerized. How the people loved their computers because their computers were omniscient and people always bow to omniscience.

A voice cried out, “In the wilderness, get ready for the coming King. In the wilderness, be washed, be cleansed.” Another voice whispered above the silence, “He watched only the stars at night. He watched them coming out one at a time. How he loved the silence of the stars.” But another voices shouted a question so all the world could hear, “Is God a giant computer in the sky or is God in the invisible space between the stars?”

The city is sophistication. It is class. It is real class. The city is knowing how to eat, using the right fork and avoiding the wrong fork, the short ones for salads and the long one for dinner. The city is knowing how to talk with a suave, lilting language, using the right word at the right time for the right situation. The city is knowing how to dress right, knowing what to wear and what not to wear; knowing what books to read and what books not to read; knowing the right symphonies to listen to and which music to avoid. The city is class; it is sophistication and so comfortable.

A voice cried out in the wilderness, “Get ready for the coming of the King. Be washed. Be cleansed.” Another voice whispered, “He dressed so simply. He wore only a shirt made out of camel hair. His shirt was so plain, so simple.” Another voice shouted the question for the world, “Is God sophisticated, pure class, like royalty is? Or did he come dressed in the clothing of a carpenter?”

The people had come to love their city. They had come to love the city for the nature of human beings is to love the city of man more than the God of the desert. To worship the city. To be tantalized by the city. To be addicted to the city. To love and worship the city, the technology of the city, the way of the city. The city? The city always results in the death of the soul. The more a person loves the city of man, the more that person loses their love of the God of the desert. The soul needs the desert in order to live. The soul needs the desert in order to survive.

Israel loved the city. Israel was in captivity and had come to love the city. The Israelites didn't want to go out into the wilderness. The Jews had come to love the foods of Egypt, the cathedrals of Egypt, the technology of Egypt, the sophistication of Egypt. Their souls had become absorbed in Egypt and they didn't want to go into the desert because they loved the technology of Egypt. But God led the Jews into the desert as God always leads people into the desert in order to grow. In order to renew their souls, in order to be purified; in order to become clean. God always leads people into the desert in order to prepare them for a new land, for a new mission, for a new life, in order to live in the city.

Today, the Word of the Lord is clear. The Lord says to you and me, "Go into the wilderness and become clean. Go into the wilderness and be cleansed. Your mind, your imagination, your heart, your actions, your words, your habits. Jesus himself went into the desert. Jesus was baptized in the desert and immediately he went further into the desert for forty days and forty nights, preparing for a new mission, for a new life, for a new ministry in the city of man.

So, you ask the question: "Where is the desert? Where is this wilderness? Where is this desert that you talk of?" Your very questions betray your reluctance to leave the city. To ask such questions at all betrays our reluctance. It is like the Jews of slavery, anxious to remain in Egypt, asking God, "Where is Mount Sinai?" The Jews knew where Mount Sinai was. They really wanted to stay in Egypt and not go into the desert, and so they asked questions, in order to avoid going into the desert. We are the same.

But the miracle can only happen in the desert. So we ask other questions. "Where is the desert? Where is the wilderness? Is the wilderness a camping trip? Is it a hike around Mount Rainier? Is it a trip in my tent trailer or motor home around the Olympic Peninsula? Such foolish questions are asked by people who think merely in the thought patterns of the city.

The wilderness is where God lives. The wilderness is any place where a person becomes absorbed in the powerful presence of God. The wilderness is where anyone is alone, totally alone, really alone, with the ultimate issues of life, death and eternity. The wilderness is in a Book, in a thin wafer and thimble of wine. The wilderness is in a prayer and a still small voice. Sometimes it is in a slum. Sometimes, it is in a closet. Sometimes it is in an apartment. The wilderness is always where the cross of God is invisibly present. The wilderness is where God is, and where God can cleanse our polluted minds and imaginations and hearts and values and habits and anything else inside of us.

The wilderness is silence and quiet. It is the elimination of the sounds of television, the radio, the stereo, the CD, the Walkman. It is the elimination of the voices of mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends. It is the elimination of the racing tape of my own mind that absorbs my thoughts. It is quiet. It is utter stillness. It is being alone with God. It is for a moment, for a minute, for a month, being still, absolutely still...and listening. God speaks in the wilderness of silence. The city is so noisy; so busy; so crowded in my mind. The wilderness is silence and God speaks to us through the silence.

In the wilderness, you actually hear the voice of God speaking, "Be washed. Be cleansed of the pollution of resentment, rage, and revenge. Be washed of whatever is hurting your life and the lives of others. Hear the voice, "Your sins are forgiven; go and sin no more." Hear the voice, "Love one another as I have loved you." Hear the voice, "You shall love God with all you have inside, all your heart, mind, soul and strength...and your neighbor as yourself." Be quiet. Be still. In the wilderness, you finally can see the stars and hear the sounds of the wind. In the quietness of the wilderness. Be still and you will hear the voice of God.

They came ten, twenty, thirty, forty miles to hear him preach. They came out from their cities and into the wilderness. What did they come to see? A reed shaken by the wind? No. They came out to see a prophet and more than a prophet. They came out to see a man who had found the powerful presence of God in the wilderness.

Then we read: Already the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

God has compared Himself to a dove, an eagle, a lion, a tower, a fortress, a counselor and a friend. Today God puts on the flannel shirt and boots, grabs an axe in His hands, and plays the part of the great and mighty lumberjack: the Paul

Bunyan of heaven. He sharpens His axe and heads out into the forest. He's ready to chop some trees down. The bigger they are, the harder they fall. If you've ever chopped down a tree, you know how refreshing and powerful it can make you feel as they fall to the ground.

We need to hear this too, even as Christians. It is the message of Advent. We are more used to the pleasant God, the smiling God, the generous God, the friendly God, who holds us by the hand as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. These are pictures of God that we like - and they're good pictures that are meant to comfort us. We feel safe with baby Jesus in the crib, lying in a manger. We don't feel threatened by a God who is dying on a cross and allowing us to crucify Him. What harm is He? He's all about love and forgiveness. He's willing to die for me. He loves me with an unconditional love. This God doesn't scare me at all.

But here, He's sharpening his axe and He's getting ready to violently cut someone down right at the roots. He's scary. He seems much too aggressive for today's Christian. He looks too mean, too masculine, and too threatening. But when you read God's Word, He threatens all the time.

God doesn't cut down trees just for his own temporary enjoyment. He doesn't do it to keep Himself warm. He does it because He is just. He does it to call people to repentance, so that a new tree can branch forth and grow. The Lumberjack knows how to run a tree farm. He knows when to prune and He knows when to chop down. He knows what to do with the wood, what to build with and what to throw in the fire. Just look at what He did with the wood of the cross!

As God the Lumberjack threatens to swing the axe, we are called on to listen and bow before Him. When we see Him chop people down to size, we humbly ask Him to spare us. Yet even if He chooses to swing, we know that the Lumberjack knows best, to use our failure or our fall as a way of building His church all the bigger and better. He has the power to take a stump and transplant it into His kingdom, water it and make it grow. We pray for His mercy and strength, to keep growing in Christ, and to keep from pride as we grow. We pray that God would open our ears to listen to His warnings, clinging to the cross, waiting for Jesus to come as our Savior.

Amen.

“LIKE WALDO I’M IN THE CROWD”


Message for the Third Sunday in Advent

From Pastor Norman Staker

December 14, 2025

ISAIAH 35: 1-10 ** JAMES 5: 7-10 ** MATTHEW 11: 2-11

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. COME THOU LONG EXPECTED
JESUS. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!!

 I was reading the latest issue of Christ in Our Home, more specifically the page devoted to today, December 14. I have to say it brought back memories of good days and bad days. I don’t know how many of you know that I managed the local City Loan/Citifinancial branch on Vernon St and after that, I worked for another loan company, Eagle Loan, where ‘we make loans to people not credit scores.’ They actually expect people to pay them back. But reading that article, it starts out with the question, “Do we really need all the credit cards that stress our financial health?” I am not here to be critical of those of you who might have credit card debt; I’m betting you pay your bills. Many times I went to bankruptcy court in Portsmouth to hear the debtors tell their stories about their debts. Most of it was credit card debt. I remember the lady from Sears would always show up because everyone owes Sears! She would quiz them on what they bought and where it was; bottom line, if you bought it with the credit card, she could come and get it legally. As a personal loan lender, I did not have that authority unless you pledged an auto or some other solid security on your loan; the car I could get but household goods you got to keep unless we financed its actual purchase.

I could go into great detail about my bad experiences because some people actually paid their debts. I will relay one experience that still sends shivers down my spine. I had to make a field call on a customer in Proctorville, who shall remain nameless, she had a walking bridge blocked by a chain and so was her driveway. I know enough that you don’t cross those barriers, especially when their signs say Beware of Dog and No Trespassing. Hers did so I didn’t. The next day she came in and I was joking with her about going to her house and she started making threats to me. My manager then did not jump to my defense and of course

I never went back to her house; he thought it was funny up to my last day there. After I left that company, she was arrested for murdering her husband, also on the account, and cutting up his body and putting the body parts in the freezer. She's in prison now! True story!!

That article in CIOH asks the question about whether a person could take out their credit cards and cut them up. Could you? You? It's Christmas time; I need my credit cards! I love the commercial that shows actors who supposedly owed huge amounts on their credit cards; one man said he owed credit card debt over 30 some thousand. National Debt Relief helped him get rid of most of that and at the end of the commercial, he was planning a trip to Puerto Rico and I've often wondered whose credit card he's going to use!

Most of us here today, who are considered middle class in America, don't actually see many poor people on an average day, except on television. Most American church members are white, middle-class, well dressed, well fed, and have beautiful homes. But what about the poor? What does Jesus tell us to do for the poor? More importantly, what are we doing for the poor?

Preaching to the poor was important to Jesus. Listen to how important it was to Jesus to preach to the poor. When John the Baptist was put in prison, he became discouraged and believed that Jesus was not the Messiah. He sent a messenger to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" John the Baptist expected a Messiah who was a political Deliverer, one who would drive the Romans into the sea. No wonder John the Baptist doubted; he was imprisoned by the Romans, the very ones he expected Jesus to drive into the sea.

Notice Jesus' answer: "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have Good News brought to them."

Surely, the miracles of Jesus were signs enough to demonstrate that He was the Messiah, but Jesus added the phrase, "The poor have Good News brought to them." I like the way the NRSV says the poor have Good News brought to them. Other versions say the poor have the Gospel preached to them." Do you like being preached to as opposed to the Gospel being brought to you? I don't. Why is bringing the Gospel to the poor important?

SEVEN THINGS THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT THE POOR

1. Don't despise the poor. This command occurs early in Scripture, "You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great. With justice you shall judge your neighbor." (Leviticus 19:15). This means three things about the poor:

- a. Don't look down upon the poor, and despise them.
- b. Don't take advantage of them financially or otherwise.
- c. Don't turn your back to helping them.

2. There will always be poor people.

As much as America has done for the poor, there will always be poor people. The Scriptures remind us, "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" (Deut. 15:11).

3. God blesses those who look after the poor.

The Bible teaches, "Happy are those who consider the poor; the Lord delivers them in the day of trouble." (Psalm 41:1).

4. We should give to the poor.

Paul mentions in Galatians 2:10, "They asked only one thing, that we should remember the poor." Again, Proverbs mentions that "we should have mercy on the poor."

5. People generally look down upon the poor.

The Proverbs note, "The poor is hated even of his own." This means even poor people look down on other poor.

6. Never segregate the poor in church.

James tells us it is a sin to give preference to the rich. He tells us, "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our Lord Jesus Christ? James 2:1). Some preachers have done this. They have reserved the best places for the rich, and they put the poor in the balcony where they used to put the

slaves. In colonial America, they put the poor in the balcony when the rich used to buy their pews. James also says, “For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please,’ while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there’ or ‘Sit at my feet,’ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?” (James 2:2-4).

7. The poor can have great faith.

Oftentimes, poor people who do not put their trust in money and things; they put their trust in God. It is possible for a poor person to have deeper faith in the Lord Jesus than a rich person.

Remember the widow who quietly put her mite into the offering about the time rich people were making a great show of giving to God? Jesus commended the woman not for giving a small offering, but because she gave everything to God.

What did Jesus mean when He said, “Blessed [are] the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven?” (Matthew 5:3) Maybe Jesus was describing that the attitude of the poor is the attitude we must all have if we are going to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. And what is that attitude?

a. Humility. God loves humble people and pride is one of the seven deadly sins. The poor are usually humble.

b. Grateful. God loves people who are grateful for what they get in life. That describes the poor. So, God loves those who are grateful for salvation.

c. Submissive. The poor know they must be submissive to get anything. God loves people who are submissive to Him.

Therefore, the poor know that there are certain attitudes they must have to get ahead in life. Those are the same attitudes a person must perfect when he comes to God.

Like Waldo, I'm In The Crowd!

There has been a time in my life when I have been like the blind man, that I too couldn't see, maybe not physically but spiritually.

There have been times in my life, I have been like the lame man, not physically but emotionally and mentally, broken down, bruised, hurt, crippled and in need of healing.

I too can identify with those who are infected with leprosy; I have been infected with something far worse than any disease that has ever touched mankind; it eats at your very existence; it changes the person you are and the kind of person you want to be. It is sin!

There have been times in my life, I have been like the woman at the well, wanting acceptance and love, only finding disappointments in relationships, not being able to give love or receive love fully.

At times I have followed Jesus faithfully and times I too have turned away from Him.

At times, like Peter, I have made great statements of faith and then, there have been times like Peter, I have denied knowing Him. Maybe not with my words but with my actions.

At times I have been like the crowd who sang "Hosanna" praising His name and then, there have been times I have been like the crowd who cursed Him and mocked Him. Maybe not with my mouth but certainly with my attitude, my actions, my thoughts.

There have been times when I have listened to His voice and heeded His call and then, there are times, when I have totally ignored His voice and done what I wanted, knowing there would be consequences.

There have been times I have worshiped Him from my heart, pouring out thankfulness to Him for what He has done for me, and there have been times when I have driven those nails into His hands and feet, not only with my sins but with my decisions (my choice) to rebel against the forgiveness that He offers.

There have been times when I have told of His wonderful miracles and then, there have been those times when I have not recognized His plan or His work.

There have been times when I've had compassion upon people and then, there have been times when I have been as hard-hearted as the Pharisees.

I have been His disciple, learning, studying, obeying and then there are times when I have been His betrayer.

There have been times I have forgiven people for what they have done to me, just as Jesus taught and there have been times that I have been as unforgiving as the unforgiving servant in the parable Jesus told about.

“Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?” is the question at the heart of Advent. It gives voice to our hesitancy even in the midst of anticipation. It allows us to express uncertainty even though our viewpoint is on the other side of the incarnation. It provides us with the words to articulate what our hearts, our souls, actually feel when our mind tries us to convince us to stay quiet. “Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?”

Let John’s question be your question this week, and the question you get to ask with, alongside of, and for the sake of your people. Ask it together, not to answer it, not to solve it, not to tie it all up in a pretty Christmas bow, but to lean in to the waiting, the wanting, and the wonder so we can hear God’s answer.


AMEN!!

Lift Us to the Joy Divine

Message for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

From Sylvia Gardener

December 21, 2025

e are just days away from Christmas, and I hope that this season is full of hope, peace, joy and love for you. I hope that you have had time to reflect on the promises of the Advent season, the season in which we prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus.

This third Sunday of Advent we light the candle of joy. We sing, “Joyful Joyful We Adore Thee.” In our gospel lesson the angels in the night sky proclaim, “Behold I bring you good news of great joy ... for to you is born this day ... a Savior who is Christ the Lord.” The whole long story of scripture declares that God’s joy is at the heart of our lives.

The biblical definition of joy says that joy is a feeling of pleasure and happiness that is dependent on who Jesus is rather than on who we are or what is happening around us. Joy comes from the Holy Spirit, abiding in God's presence and from hope in His word.

The whole story of scripture is really about joy. “The desert shall rejoice and bloom,” the prophet Isaiah says to the people of Israel. “The Lord is king, let the earth rejoice,” and “Be joyful in the Lord all you lands,” the psalmists proclaim. Paul says. “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice! And even, on the last night of his life, as Jesus sat with his disciples he had joy on his mind: “I have said these things to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”

Joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness is a fleeting sense that things are great at this moment, or that you’re having fun. Happiness happens to us. Even though we may seek it, desire it and pursue it, feeling happy is not a choice we make. Joy, on the other hand, is a choice we purposefully make. Even if our day-to-day is filled with hurt and disappointment, we can still choose joy.

Christmas is a joyful time, but one gets tired of enforced “joyfulness”, especially when it’s Walmart and Amazon doing the enforcing. You won’t find joy by wandering through a mall this time of year, or watching a TV Christmas show, or going to a Christmas movie. Chances are that even the gift you really wanted for

Christmas won't deliver that much joy.

Joy is in its essence a deep sense of peace and security and wholeness. It can rise up spontaneously, as it did for the angels, the deep glad joy that comes when longed-for good news arrives.

Joy is also a quiet sense of the goodness in our world, a sense that even in our busiest or hardest times we're being held in God's hands.

The story of that first Christmas seems to begin with anything but joy. In the Christmas story, the angel Gabriel told the Virgin Mary that she would give birth to Jesus, the Son of God.

Mary's response to the angel's message is a model of joyful acceptance and faith.

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. And everyone went to their own town to register.

By the time Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, the Inn was full and they had to sleep in the cattle barn. And there Mary gave birth to her son and wrapped him in cloths to keep him warm. And the shepherds out in the fields heard the angels singing and heard their announcement of "great joy."

That's the way the Church has remembered that first holy night. This beautiful story captures our deepest conviction that God took on flesh in that child and lived among us.

Who would have guessed that God would act in this way by becoming human? And yet we needed to know, to touch and to see the great, mysterious God for ourselves. Jesus came to give a face, and that face was the face of love. Now we can say that we have encountered the Word made flesh. We have seen the face of God.

There is no way, of course, to prove that joy is at the heart of life. But this we know. Those who believe the angels' message and those who have trusted Jesus' promise that the joy of God can fill our lives, have found their lives more full, more joyful and more alive.

Be still and remember the times that you have felt some form of true joy in your own lives. It probably was an unexpected moment that inspired such an awesome feeling it that it took your breath away. Some of my own moments include: a winter camping trip in the Adirondacks and waking to a quiet, star-filled night- the

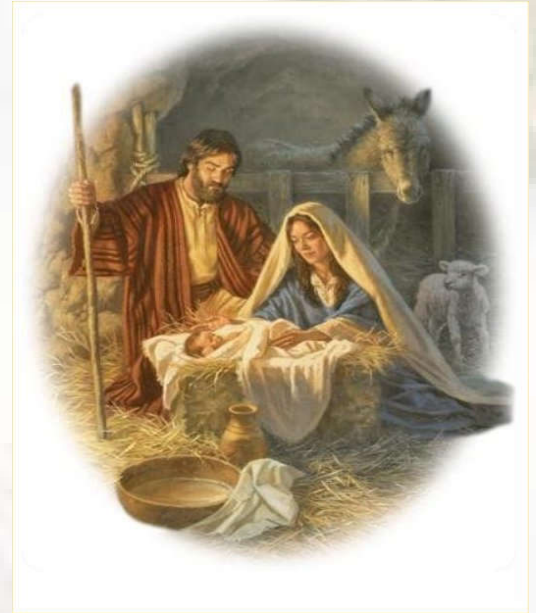
silence of it; a beautiful rainbow in Idaho; the perfect snowflake landing on my backpack; the veins of a flower or leaf; or the rain on the metal roof of my family's home.

Christ is born again and again, because Christ is alive in every one of us. To discover that joy is to know that it has to be shared. To have a glimpse of the Christ Child, to see that the maker of the stars and sea became a child on earth for you and for me is to be given a joy that we have to share.

JOY TO THE WORLD, THE LORD HAS COME.

“NOTHING WILL EVER BE THE SAME AGAIN”

Message for “*Christmas Eve*”
The “*Nativity of Our Lord*”
From Pastor Norman Staker
ISAIAH 9: 2-7 * TITUS 2: 11-14
LUKE 2: 1-14 (15-20)



GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR, THE WONDERFUL COUNSELOR, THE MIGHTY GOD, THE EVERLASTING FATHER, THE PRINCE OF PEACE. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!!

Christmas Eve. Can you believe we’ve come to another Christmas Eve, the night before Christmas when all through the house but this was not in a house but a cold, damp, rather, actually very stinky manger, where cattle and donkeys and sheep all left their respective odor laden piles of waste. In the middle of all that, a woman, a young teenager, was about to give birth. No doctors, no nurses, no fancy medical facilities, no midwives, no epidurals, no medicine of any kind. Just the pain of childbirth promised to Eve and every woman after that sin of hers in the Garden of Eden. “To the woman I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.” But surely God would make an exception to the special child Mary was carrying. No, she wouldn’t have any pain or would she?

Tonight, there is something different in the air. You can feel it the moment you walk in. The lights are softer, the voices quieter, the pace slower. Even people who never come to church any other time of year find themselves here on Christmas Eve. There is a reason for that. Something in the human heart knows this night matters. We gather because deep down we sense that Christmas is more than a date on a calendar; it is a moment that calls us to pause, to reflect, and to remember. Christmas Eve invites us to step out of the noise of the world and into the stillness of a holy night. For a few moments, the deadlines can wait, the pressures can rest, and the worries can loosen their grip. Tonight, we are not here by accident. God has a way of drawing hearts together on this night, reminding us that before there

were gifts to open, songs to sing, or traditions to keep, there was a Savior to receive.

This night reminds us that hope does not begin with what we do for God, but with what God has done for us. Long before we ever searched for Him, He came searching for us. Long before we ever reached up, He reached down. Christmas Eve takes us back to the moment when heaven leaned toward earth and eternity stepped into time. God did not send a message, He sent His Son. God did not shout from the sky, He whispered through a child.

That is why this night still moves us. It tells us that God sees us, knows us, and loves us right where we are. It tells the weary that rest has come, the broken that healing has arrived, the guilty that forgiveness is possible, and the lonely that they are not alone.

“In those days decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered.”

Powerful men like to count things. They like to count guns, missiles, planes, and, above all, they like to count people. When you count people you make them less than human.

You there, you're number 17934, stand over there in that group.

You count people when you want to gauge your success or when you want to increase your income. You count people when you want to control them, make them less than human. Prisoners are counted because they are no longer free. Soldiers are counted because they may be expendable. You count animals you plan to slaughter, but you name animals you plan to keep as family pets. You can pretty tell your fate (if you're an animal) by whether or not people call you Fluffy or Number 5918.

You also count machines. My hybrid car gets 54 miles per gallon. Or, my car can go from zero to sixty in just 6 seconds. Or, this machine is running at 85% capacity. That's also how we talk about businesses. Profits are up 30%. The market is down 10%. We have 320 employees. We get a 5% raise this year.

Now people, real people, don't fit well into numbers. When you talk about people as human beings, you talk about things like health, emotions, unity, love,

discouragement, despair, hope. Numbers don't address any of those things. Not really.

But we are like Augustus. We love numbers. We even count churches and we count attendance and we count offering. How was November at Bethel is generally looking for numbers as an answer?

Funny, Jesus wasn't good at numbers. In fact, he really did well with big crowds. OK, not really. Sure, he fed five thousand one time and 4000 another, but, when they came back the next day, he preached a sermon on the Bread of Life that ended up getting everybody except the twelve to walk away. Boy, he blew it that day; betcha he won't preach that sermon again.

Jesus, how was last week? Well, Monday was great. We had more than 5000 in attendance. But the rest of the week was a disaster. By Wednesday I had preached that 5000 listeners right down to 12.

Hmm, don't guess you'll be written up in the Living Lutheran magazine this year, huh?

Augustus was a powerful man and Rome was really just a massive machine where human beings served as little more than economic units to support the empire.

On the night that Jesus was born, there was a lot of men sitting around counting things. Money. Profits. Slaves, Conquests. Population. No wonder they didn't notice a child born in a barn. And when his parents later had to flee to Egypt, he was just another Palestinian refugee. Another nameless face in a sea of nameless faces.

“Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem because he was descended from the house and lineage of David. He went to be registered with Mary to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.”

It's no fun to travel anywhere during the holiday season. The roads are crowded. So are planes. Semis are hurtling by at 90 mph. Gas prices are fortunately down. The kids are bored. Are we there yet?

It says something interesting about American society when you can sell a family vehicle for taking on family trips by pointing out that you can strap the kids in the

back, stick headphones on them, drop a little screen down, and have them watching the same cartoons they watch at home. A great family trip, right! Everyone sitting in the same vehicle and no one talking or listening to anyone else.

We don't know how long it was after Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem before the birth. Was it an hour, a day, a week? We don't even know how they traveled. There is no mention of Mary riding a donkey. We just don't know.

What we do know is that it was a night when tired people were on the road. Some on business. Some on vacation. Some looking for work. Some looking for food. Some fleeing for their lives. And in Bethlehem that night they would have had the full gamut. Families, thieves, businessmen, soldiers on leave, and, of course, shepherds.

And here was this young couple. A girl little more than sixteen or seventeen. Pregnant outside of wedlock. Another unwed mother who could have been stoned to death for adultery were it not for God. No wonder they were shuffled off into a barn. Exhausted. Confused.

"While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

Did you know that there is no recorded birth in scripture after the birth of the Lord Jesus?

Did you know that the last genealogy or family tree listed in the New Testament is that of the

Lord Jesus? Because the entire Bible, from Genesis to Malachi, pointed to the birth and the name of Jesus Christ.

Two things that I now know based on those experiences. First, I do not get nearly as much sympathy when I claim some bodily pain as I used to. Second, if there was a baby born in Bethlehem that night, it was most definitely not born in silence. Mary cried. The baby cried. For all we know Joseph cried. And the animals, baaing, bleating, mooing, braying. They were noisy too. Shhh, can't you see there's a baby trying to sleep!

Like all births, Jesus entered the world through pain and agony and love and hope. If you've ever given birth, we can't forget that He came into this world as a blood smeared newborn, crying helplessly in a feeding trough, long before it was a theological concept waiting to be analyzed in nicely typed academic papers.

It is hard not to read the story and distort it. We already know the ending. We've known it since childhood. But Mary did not know the story even a moment beyond whatever was the now in her life. This was not a night framed in the beautiful art of countless Christmas cards; this was a night of pain and, probably, fear.

Imagine how things looked to Mary?

She hadn't heard a word since the Angel had spoken to her nine months earlier. Joseph had experienced a dream, but nothing else came to Mary. Did she think they'd get to Bethlehem and then make it back home to Nazareth before the birth? But, here she was, and the waves of overwhelming pain made it absolutely clear what was about to happen.

Maybe she feared she'd blown it. Think about it.

Maybe they should not have tried to travel. Maybe Joseph should have gone to Bethlehem, alone. Maybe the birth was coming a few weeks earlier than she had expected. None of that really mattered. It was too late for anything but enduring that shadow of the valley of death known to every woman who's given birth to a child. Even more so in the ancient world, when it was not uncommon for a woman to die while trying to give birth.

And, surely she would have thought, she must have missed something. Some clue. Some voice in the middle of the night telling them what to do.

Now, here they were, in a town full of strangers and, on top of that, in a barn. This couldn't be right. Gabriel had said nothing at all about barns. No mention of cattle. She was sure he never once said the word "manger." This was all supposed to have happened somewhere else, but surely, not to me, not to the Mother of the Christ Child.

And Joseph wasn't much help. What did he know about giving birth? Most men didn't know anything about that. And there was the baby. What do they do next? Where do they go from here? Since she had obviously taken a wrong turn somewhere, would God just abandon her and seek someone else?



On that anything but a silent night, the silence of eternity stepped into the world of noise and fury, and even as He did, the storms began to calm.

Folks, God didn't come to earth to be with us because we were perfect. God came to be with us in our woundedness and brokenness, to give us a chance to be whole again. That is why God came in the form of a tiny infant, born in poverty and obscurity in a place and time where he was neither expected or welcomed, except by a few.

God comes to us again this Christmas, holding out infant arms, beckoning us as shepherds were beckoned by other angels long ago, to come and see Emmanuel, God With Us.

Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord.

AMEN!!

“WHEN CHRISTMAS ISN’T PICTURE PERFECT”

Message for the First Sunday in Christmas

From Pastor Norman Staker

December 28, 2025

ISAIAH 63: 7-9 ** HEBREWS 2: 10-18 ** MATTHEW 2: 13-23

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR THE NEWBORN CHILD OF BETHLEHEM.
AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!!

Here we are, just 3 days after Christmas, can you believe it, already 3 days, but it is, and furthermore, it can be a bit of a letdown. The presents are all opened. There are fragments of paper floating around the floor behind the sofa or under chairs. The tree, if it’s still up, is looking a little droopy and disheveled, unless it’s an artificial one; you don’t have to water them as often so they don’t get droopy that fast! We may be eating leftovers. The high spirits and high hopes of Christmas Day seem short-lived. Certainly the packed house and robust hymn singing on Christmas Eve seem some distance away when the first Sunday, today in other words, the first Sunday after Christmas rolls around and attendance has dropped off. And we had a good crowd on Christmas Eve. Thanks again to everyone who came that night.

And thank you Bethel for your gift to me and to others who also gave me a gift; and for your cards; they were all very much appreciated!

Why can’t it be Christmas every day of the year? Even though there’s a song that says, “Why can’t every day be like Christmas?” We can’t have our wish that everyday be like Christmas.

It isn’t by accident that today we have the words of Isaiah chapter 63 for our first reading on this first Sunday of Christmas: “I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. He lifted them up and

carried them all the days of old.” These verses are an introduction to a prayer of lament that echoes our yearnings for things to go well every day of the year.

This year I came across this fictional Christmas correspondence between Martha Stewart and Erma Bombeck to remind me that Christmas isn’t always picture perfect. As I read it, you’ll understand why it’s fictional; at least I think so! Martha writes:

Hi Erma, This perfectly delightful note is being sent on paper I made myself to tell you what I have been up to. Since it snowed last night, I got up early and made a sled with old barn wood and a glue gun. I hand painted it in gold leaf, got out my loom, and made a blanket in peaches and mauves. Now it’s time to start making the place mats and napkins for my 20 breakfast guests. I’m serving the old standard Stewart 12-course breakfast, but I didn’t have time to make the tables and chairs this morning, so I used the ones I already had. I did take time to make the dishes to use for breakfast from Hungarian clay, which you can get at almost any Hungarian craft store. Well, I must run. I need to finish the buttonholes on the dress I’m wearing for breakfast. I’ll get out the sled and drive this note to the post office as soon as the glue dries on the envelope I’ll be making.- Love, Martha Stewart

Response from Erma Bombeck:

Dear Martha,

I’m writing this on the back of an old shopping list, pay no attention to the coffee and jelly stains. I’m 20 minutes late getting my daughter up for school, packing a lunch with one hand, on the phone with the dog pound, seems old Ruff needs bailing out, again. Burnt my arm on the curling iron when I was trying to make those cute curly fries. Still can’t find the scissors to cut out some snowflakes, tried using an old disposable razor...trashed the tablecloth. Tried that cranberry thing, frozen cranberries mushed up after I defrosted them in the microwave. Oh, and don’t use Fruity Pebbles as a substitute in that Rice Krispie snowball recipe, unless you happen to like a disgusting shade of green! The smoke alarm is going off, talk to ya later.- Love, Erma

I don’t know anybody who enjoys the Martha Stewart picture perfect Christmas. Kids get sick, people lose their jobs, and as we know, people even die. Trouble doesn’t take a holiday even at Christmas. That shouldn’t surprise us: even the first Christmas wasn’t picture perfect. In the midst of all the miracles and joy, there

were a lot of hassles, and a lot of hurting. Look with me at the words of our Gospel in Matt. 2:13-23 and let's see the hassles, the hurting, and the hope of Christmas.

What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer? If I could work the will of my Uncle Scrooge, every idiot who goes about with "Merry Christmas" on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart."

Christmas costs too much, too much time in shopping and decorating, too much stress trying to get everything done. But don't feel bad; it was a hassle for Joseph and Mary, too.

The first hassle was Mary's pregnancy. Joseph and Mary were betrothed, but not officially married. Joseph was ready to call the whole thing off until an angel explained the situation. Would Joseph have liked the angel to explain the situation to mom & dad and the rest of the family? Imagine the hassle Mary endured as an unwed mother, the hassle of a wedding, the whispers and guessing: why Joseph would do such a thing, or who would of thought such a thing of a nice girl like Mary; if the baby isn't Joseph's, then who is the father?

But the hassles are just beginning. Not long after the wedding, the Emperor decreed that every male Israelite return to their birthplace and pay a new tax, a bill Joseph hadn't planned on paying, a trip he hadn't planned on making. His bride is ready to give birth; now this extra expense and trip they need to take (do hassles of Christmas bills and Christmas trips sound familiar?)

Joseph scrounges up the money, they head out for Bethlehem, where they meet another hassle: no room in the inn. With a wife about to give birth, Joseph settles for the only accommodations available: a stable. In that dirty stable surrounded by stinking animals, without a doctor, without a nurse, without an epidural, Mary gives birth and everything is OK.

But not for long. V. 13 records after Jesus is born, an angel brings a message to Joseph; it's supposedly the first recording of an insect in the New Testament: Take Mary and the baby and flee to Egypt (flea to Egypt)! King Herod is going to try to murder the baby.

How would you respond? Lord, enough is enough! Why don't you zap Herod with some fatal illness? Haven't we been through enough? But Joseph packed up his

family, and struck out for Egypt, where he would eventually get a job and set up housekeeping for awhile.

Over and over Joseph and Mary endure hassle after hassle all for the sake of the Baby. But notice something else: for every hassle, God provides help. He sends Angels to explain what He's doing. He provides funds for them to get to Bethlehem; He saves a reservation in the stable, not a Marriott or a Hampton or even a Motel 6 where the only light on was a candle burning in the stable. He sends the Wise Men's gifts to finance the rescue of Jesus from Herod. Over and over the story reminds us God always provides help to deal with our hassles.

He does the same thing for you and me. No matter what your hassle, God offers you His help. He's not Santa Claus, but He will give you what you need if you ask Him. He won't always save you from every pothole in the road, but He will give you grace to keep going. He won't knock off everybody who threatens you, but He will protect you and guide you. When Christmas is full of hassles, remember God is full of help.

Pain doesn't take a holiday either. Christmas is a very painful time for many. Sometimes it's grief missing a loved one who has passed on; sometimes it's living in a sick or handicapped body. The single person or divorcee dreads spending another lonely Christmas wondering why. Families of military men and women miss loved ones even more at Christmas than any other time. Christmas can not only be full of hassles, but also full of hurt. Lord, why do You allow such pain and heartache on Christmas? But the truth is Christmas has been full of hurt ever since Jesus was born.

The particular pain in this story comes after Joseph and Mary leave Bethlehem for Egypt. Herod tried to fool the Wise Men into showing him where this "King of the Jews" would be born so he could eliminate any competitors for his throne. When he figures out the Wise Men have fooled him, it sends him into one of his characteristic rages, and he gives orders for his troops to ride out to the little town of Bethlehem on a special mission.

The soldiers see fear on the faces of the people as they ride in. Nobody knows for sure why they are there. Perhaps they start rounding up all the families with small children. From that group they sort out those with small sons. Finally, they call out the families with small sons 2 years old and younger. Then they start carrying out their orders.

Mom, can you feel the horror of the moment you realize what they've come to do? I imagine the soldiers kill some moms and dads to get to the children. How many of them call out to God to save their sons? But in the end, it doesn't make any difference. These innocent children are slaughtered like lambs, and horrified parents are left clinging to the corpses, screaming in grief, as the soldiers ride away. Nobody even tells them why their little boys were murdered.

But we know why: because Jesus got away. Lord, why didn't you send an angel to all those families to warn them? Lord, why didn't you strike down Herod before he could do such a horrible thing? Lord, why did you allow such pain, suffering, and death at the birth of Your Son?

I don't know if you've ever wondered about these questions, but I imagine those devastated families did. I know many of us since then wonder why God allows pain and suffering, devastation and death—especially at Christmas!

Lord, why did you take my husband/wife/child/mom/dad away? Father, why do I have to suffer through another Christmas all alone? O God, why do you leave me here, hurting and helpless in this sick body? Lord, why do I have to hurt so much at Christmas?

I don't have all the answers, and even if I did, I'm not sure answers would heal your hurts. All I really know is God makes a promise to all of us who are in pain: He promises His presence.

Psalm 34:18-19 18: 'The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart.'

Where are you Lord when I'm hurting? I'm right here, My precious Child. Lord, why do you allow me to hurt so bad? You couldn't understand, My beloved child if I told you. But trust Me when I say you never suffer alone. When I don't stop the pain, I will hold always hold you, I will always comfort you, I will always be there to help you keep going until the day I take the pain away.

Someone has said, "We can live forty days without food, eight days without water, four minutes without air, but only a few seconds without hope."

Jesus didn't die in Bethlehem as a Baby because His hour had not come. It would not come until many years later. That Baby in the manger grew up to be the Man on the Cross, and that Cross is what brings hope to the hassled, hurting people who

need the hope of knowing God cares about them, the hope that God can help them start all over again, can erase their past and give them a hope of eternal life.

That's why you and I can celebrate Christmas. We celebrate the Hope God gives us through His Son: hope for today, for tomorrow, and for eternity. God doesn't offer us a hassle free or hurt free life, but He does offer us a hope-filled life through our faith in Jesus Christ. We can bring all our laments, our hopes, and our yearnings to God, especially in difficult times of tragedy and suffering.

We can do it with confidence and deep hope. God is all about lifting up and carrying us. God is present in every day working for God's peace, joy, and good.

In a sense every day is Christmas because the grace of God is in every day.

Amen!!

“GLIMPSE THE DIVINE LIGHT”


Message for the Second Sunday in Christmas

From Pastor Norman Staker

January 4, 2026

JEREMIAH 31: 7-14 EPHESIANS 1: 3-14 JOHN 1: (1-9) 10-18

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR
LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS THE CHRIST, THE WORD MADE FLESH.
AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!!

 I don't normally make New Year's resolutions but this year I decided to give it a try and the two, yes only two, that I made concern you good people of Bethel; and before I give them to you, I want to wish all of you a very Happy New Year and a very healthy one. The resolutions I made are to have shorter sermons, you can applaud if you want to, and to use more Greek and Hebrew in my messages since most of Scripture was written in those languages. And if I can, I'll translate too so you won't be totally lost! OK?

Three of the gospels tell the story of the Incarnation. There is Matthew's gospel, which begins with the genealogy of Jesus, then tells us, "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way." It continues with the announcement of the angel to Joseph, and of the wise men's visit. In Mark's gospel, we read 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' There is Luke, my favorite version and I'm sure a lot of you would agree with me, which contains the intimate story of a young couple – traveling because of the census, finding no room in the inn, and of the lonely shepherds, whose life is invaded by a thousand-thousand angels.

And then there is John's gospel, where we realize most clearly that this isn't the story of a baby – but that it is the story of the Messiah, the Son of God, who has reigned at the Father's side, creating the universe.

Our God becomes like us.

On the grand scale, this is what makes Christmas, the gathering of God's people in the presence of His Christ. And even as we look at our nativity sets, with Mary and Joseph, especially Joseph, realizing that he has to raise the Messiah, can you imagine the responsibility placed on his shoulders! and then there are the animals, it is the glory of God who is not just the baby – but fully God, that will matter.

Do we realize that the baby in the manger is God? Do we realize the tiny fingers once flung the stars into place, that the mouth uttered the words that created light, the sun and moon? That spoke again and the words caused the creation of the seas and land – and then again and again, as the world was filled with plants and then animals?

That from the dust He, who would be nourished by young Mary, was there when Adam was fashioned from the dirt of the ground – that He was there when the Father promised Adam and Eve that their son would crush the serpent? That this baby in the manger walked with Enoch, and ate with Abraham, guided Moses and Joshua, who gave wisdom to the Judges, who inspired David's songs?

And then, miraculously, was born of a virgin? The one through whom John says all was created?

It makes more sense, as we realize the people during the time of His life treated him the same way as the people of Israel treated God during their walk through Sinai, and as they did during the judges and kings and prophets.

They did not recognize Him. They came to Him to heal them, to raise their dead, to make the blind see, and the lame walk. They marveled at His teachings, but they did not recognize God in their midst. They continued in sin, even in the presence of the Holy One.

The world still struggles with sin, even as it did before His birth. It still struggles with recognizing Him in His handiwork, the very nature that proclaims His existence. It struggles with His masterpiece- the incredible mosaic of people that He has recreated in their baptism – that is what He calls his masterpiece-us!

And they rejected Him – they didn't recognize Him, and in their sin and confusion, and fear, they crucified the Lord of glory.

And He let them. Hebrews tells us that it is with joy Christ our Creator embraced the cross, despising its shame, but knowing that we would be, as Paul writes to Titus, washed, regenerated and renewed by the Holy Spirit. This accomplished through His baptizing us, as the Spirit is poured out on us, as we are justified, as we are adopted and made heirs with the hope of eternal life.

That is what John means by those incredible words, that because God was incarnate, because He dwelt among us, to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of

blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

John goes on to indicate the incredible message of the birth, the incarnation, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

What is at the center and core of your life? Everything in the world and in our lives are made to focus on Jesus Christ. For most people in this world, this is obviously not the case. And for many of us, we stumble and don't always have our lives centered on Jesus. But this is God's will. Our purpose in life is to glorify the King of kings. This is why we call ourselves Christians – we center our lives around Jesus Christ.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

John gives us three tremendous statements to introduce us to our Lord Jesus Christ. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” This is John's version of the birth of Christ.

The phrase, ‘The Word’ is one of the highest and most profound titles of the Lord Jesus. To determine its exact meaning is not easy. Obviously the Lord Jesus is not the ‘logos’ of Greek philosophy; rather he is the ‘memra’ of the Hebrew scripture. What are you saying Pastor? Is this your New Year's resolution, to speak in tongues? There is a difference in interpretation. The logos is the Word of God, a principle of divine reason in the Greek while the memra is Hebrew and nothing more than a substitute for God, in other words, he's like a messenger for God. Notice if you will just how important the Word is in the Old Testament.

For instance, the name for Jehovah was never pronounced. It was such a holy word that they never used it at all. But we're talking about the One who is the Word, and gathering up everything that was said of Him in the Old Testament, He is now presented as the One ‘in the beginning.’ This beginning antedates the very first words in the Bible, “in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” That beginning can be dated to a degree, not sure of its accuracy, so an actual date is nonsense. It probably goes back billions and billions of years. You and I are dealing with the God of the eternity and when you go back to creation, He is already there, and that is exactly the way this is used, ‘in the beginning was the Word.’ And notice it is not ‘is the Word; in the beginning is the word, but as you heard me read, ‘In the beginning was the Word.’

As I said earlier, there are two sets of Christmas stories in the gospels. One set of Christmas stories is from the Gospels of Matthew Mark and Luke and the other from the Gospel of John. The first set of Christmas stories are more familiar to us. We can see those stories, visualize those stories and imagine those stories such as Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, the baby in the manger, the sheep and the shepherds, the angels and angel's choirs, the three wise men and their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But the second Christmas story comes from the Gospel of John and we cannot see or visualize or draw John's Christmas story. Painters cannot paint paintings about John's Christmas story. John's Christmas story is abstract and philosophical.

Let me explain. There is a website that is titled, "Illustrated Gospel by Maurice Lamouroux." The French man who created this website must have had a Ph.D. in both the History of Painting and Biblical studies. Maurice Lamouroux has assembled famous paintings of Biblical stories according to Biblical theme. This website takes all the famous stories in the Bible, and assembles paintings from art museums around the world that picture those famous Bible stories. On the theme of the birth of Jesus, Dr. Lamouroux has 500 paintings that depict Jesus' infancy. Those 500 paintings about Jesus' birth are so visual and so graphic. The Christmas stories from Matthew and Luke are highly picturesque; they can be visualized and painted. Then, the author of this website lists John 1:1-18, the Christmas story from the Gospel of John. How many paintings of Jesus' birth are based on John 1:1-18? Another 500? No, not one. Not one. Not one painter has been inspired to attempt to paint the Christmas story according to the Gospel of John. Why? John's Christmas story is too abstract, too philosophical, and too mind numbing.

Normally, during the Christmas season, we focus on the Christmas story from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. But today, we are going to focus on the Christmas story from the Gospel of John. Today's sermon is a Bible study of the Christmas story in John 1:1-18.

From John 1. "The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth, and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only Son from the father, and from his fullness, we have all received grace upon grace."

"In the beginning was the Word; the Word became flesh." The Greek word for Word is "logos" from which we get our word, logic. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God" is then translated: "In the beginning was the logic and the logic was with God and the logic was God."

Before there was any creation, before there was matter, before there was light and

life, obviously, there had to be a set of brains. That's the way it always is; you have to have brains to lay out a plan. There had to be some logic to it. God was and is essentially a large cranial cavity of intelligence and brilliance. In the beginning was the logic and the logic was with God and the logic was God. The mind was God. The intelligence was God. The brilliance was God. What the Bible is saying is before something was created, there had to be a mastermind behind it; and from this logic, all light and life was created.

The Bible teaches that before the world began, Jesus was the logic of God, the mind of God, the brilliance of God. In the beginning was the logic, and the logic was with God, meaning Jesus, and the brilliant logic became flesh and lived among us. So Jesus existed far before measured time began and Jesus is the logical master mind of creation.

Then comes one of the most beautiful lines in the Bible, a line that I have loved and lived with for decades. "From his fullness, we all have received grace upon grace." I am personally aware that my life has been overwhelmed with all the grace that God has given to me personally, grace upon grace upon grace. John's Christmas gospel is so clear; that all of us have received grace upon grace upon grace. All of us. Not just Lutherans. Not just Americans. Not just Christians. Not just those who live now in this twenty first century in America. No, not at all. The Christmas Gospel is that God showers His gracious love on all of us, on the whole earth, on the whole universe.

We all love Christmas. We love the Christmas stories that we can easily visualize in our minds: Mary and Joseph and the baby, the straw and the manger, the sheep and the shepherds, the angels and the angelic choir, the three wise men, their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. But in John's gospel, we hear none of this. There are no paintings of John's Christmas gospel. None. Not one. Instead we hear, "In the beginning was the Logic and the Logic was with God and the Logic became God. All things in the universe were made by this Logic. And when the time was right, the Logic that made the universe became a human being who was full of grace and truth. And from his fullness, we all have received grace upon grace, one blessing after another."

Amen.