

*Come, Let us Walk in the
Light of the Lord*



An Advent devotion by the members of
Trinity Lutheran Church

As we once again set off for our journey to the manger this Advent season, this year we will travel by foot. In the midst of our busy schedules, we take time to walk, reflect, and draw nearer to God in our personal devotions. This daily devotion book was written by Trinity members and staff to guide you during this four-week Advent adventure.



Week 1 – Walk Aware

We are called to be awake and aware and to live differently in these latter days. Focus on what really matters.

Week 2 – Walk in Repentance

God sent His “messenger,” John the Baptist, to call people to repentance so that their hearts would be prepared to receive Jesus. We are also called to repent and return to the Lord.

Week 3 – Walk Joyfully

Because of the coming of Jesus into our world and into our lives, we can live joyfully, filled with joy and praise because of what God has done and is doing.

Week 4 – Walk Expectantly

God did not choose a princess to be the mother of Jesus nor was He born in a palace in Jerusalem. God chose a servant girl named Mary and a little backwater town called Bethlehem. God uses the ordinary and unexpected to accomplish His purposes. Are you ready?

Christmas Eve – Walk to the Manger

We are invited to come and see this “good news of great joy.” We journey to the manger in Bethlehem to see our Savior.

*Walk
Aware*



⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

1 Peter 5:6-11

Many years ago, I was driving home on a highway late at night. I was tired after a long day, and struggling to stay awake. Another driver did something unexpected, and it jolted me to greater awareness. We both remained safe; there was no accident. However, I suddenly realized that I was in a different lane than I had been, with no recollection of changing lanes. In my tiredness, my brain had slipped into autopilot. I hadn't driven off the road, but I was not really aware of what was going on.

The feasting of Thanksgiving and the shopping frenzy of Black Friday are over. There are still a few weeks of school left for the kids, a few projects at work to close out before the year's end. On top of that come a flurry of holiday parties, school performances, and presents still left to purchase. If we are not careful, all of the activity can sink us into a different kind of autopilot: so focused on making it through all the activities and checking items off our to-do lists, we plod forward step by step without thinking about the larger reality all around us.

Advent calls us to walk aware. Advent means “coming” or “arrival.” In Advent, we focus on the coming of Jesus: both his first coming as a child at Christmas and also his second coming in glory at the end of time. 1 Peter 5 warns us that the devil prowls like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. There is still a great cosmic spiritual battle going on. While the ultimate outcome of that struggle was decided on the cross, still there are places where Satan manages to kill and destroy and distort.

Advent calls us to walk aware. Advent calls us to not simply ignore and cover up that struggle with decorations and lights, but to actively work against it. Advent calls us to notice the places of hurt and brokenness, to notice those who are suffering in this world, and work to bring God's hope, love, joy and peace to those who need it. Advent calls us to long ever more for the coming of the one who will restore us and make us strong in him.

Don't turn on the autopilot. Don't be lulled to sleep. Walk aware, and look forward to the coming of our king!



A Walk in the Woods

by Tom Perry

Anxious to get home after school, the young boy decided to take a shortcut through the woods. He had been cautioned that the woods could be confusing and at times frightening. He decided this time, however, to risk it. After a few minutes he became lost and disoriented. The sun was beginning its descent and he was hearing sounds that were unfamiliar to him. Though worried, he remembered his father had always promised to love and take care of him. So, he sat down and waited. At times, the wait seemed long and he was anxious to be found. He put his trust in his father's promise.

At the boy's home his father noticed that his youngest son was gone and should have been home a good while earlier. He called his eldest son to him and said "Your brother should have been home by now. I fear he may have cut through the woods and lost his way. Go and find him and show him the way home." So, the eldest son went and found the boy, lost in the woods. When the young boy saw his brother coming, he was overjoyed and ran to him. "I knew you would find me. Father promised that he would always protect me." The eldest son took the boy's hand and showed him the way home. On the way he pointed out guideposts to help him should he get lost again. He taught him that his family is a loving family where each person's worth is highly valued. He spoke of their father's love and concern for his absent son.

This simple story illustrates how we as sinful people lose our way. Before the boy was found he was like God's people after the Fall and before the Resurrection. Often, we let our desires dictate to us without giving any thought to its ramifications. Before Christ came to show us the path home, God's people relied upon the promise of a Savior. They were waiting anxiously for him to come and walk them home. The wait seemed long but the spark of hope that a Savior would come remained.

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Christ, the Father's Son, found His people and walked along with them on their journey. He gave us guideposts through his teaching and caring so if we should stray, we are able to find our way home. After the Resurrection, we know the way home to the Father. In our journey's walk we are aware of who and whose we are. By trying to live our lives the way Jesus taught, we now can look forward to the time when He comes again. The price has been paid for our walks in the woods. Christ came and saved us and through the Resurrection, He walks us home.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, as we walk along life's journey, keep us ever aware of your love and trust in you. Help us to follow your will and be the people you want us to be. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

John 3:17 "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

aware

Look at the Fig Tree

by Gretchen Hollman

November 30

aware
²⁹ And he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. ³⁰ As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

Luke 21:29-31

Thirty-five years ago, my sister was confirmed in the Lutheran church. I was 15 at the time and gifted her with a fig tree. She was redecorating her room and wanted something to bring life to the room. Little did I know that I would re-inherit the fig tree and have it on my deck in the summer and in my living room in the winter to this day.

In Luke 21:29 Jesus commands us to “look at the fig tree” when contemplating the kingdom of God. The Bible is packed with references to nature as guides to living. Why would this be? One big reason is that the fig tree and other references to nature are tangible. It is difficult for us mere mortals to contemplate the life to come. As Christians we know that heaven will be unlike the greatest joys we have experienced, more beautiful than the most abundant garden, more breathtaking than the most colorful sunrise. God provides reminders all around us of the joy to come, indeed that joy that is already coming, just as the “summer is already near” in the parable.

As I look at the fig tree at my house, I can be aware of what it means to be a child of God as a reminder of my sister’s confirmation. As you look at the beauty of creation, you can be aware that God’s Kingdom of peace is already coming. As you stroll through the park looking at the beauty of fall colors, you can be aware of the garden of heaven that is on its way. As you feel the sweat trickling down your brow from raking the last of the fall leaves, you are aware that Jesus sweat blood before giving His life for you. As you rise out of

bed with the aches and pains that come with aging or hard work, you can be aware of the aches Mary had on the way to Bethlehem carrying a heavy belly full of Jesus, the baby who is born for you. As you look out the window on the falling snow nestling into a quiet earth, you can be aware of God’s eternal lullaby to you, singing, “Be still and know that I am God.” As you put lotion on your hands after lighting a prickly Christmas tree, may you be aware of the spikes that pierced our Savior’s hands so that you may be a helping hand to a neighbor in need. Indeed, every aspect of nature is God’s way of giving us tangible reminders of His love for us, visible signs of the kingdom of God that is already coming. As you walk through your days, may you be aware and surrounded by God’s reminders as you feel His love working in you and through you on your path to the manger and to God’s eternal kingdom.

aware

by Steve Henslee

Advent is the season in which we prepare for the coming of Jesus. During that time, we should “walk aware,” but aware of what?

I’m reminded of an Advent season story by a former senior pastor. He told the story of incorrigible Johnny, an adolescent boy, who, like most adolescents, would become overwhelmingly excited between Thanksgiving and Christmas from seeing all the preparations and from the anticipation of the visit from Santa with all the gifts.

His excitement led to a short attention span and some unruly behavior, including not minding his mother’s requests. After having to repeatedly admonish Johnny over his behavior, his mother finally snapped at the grocery store one day when Johnny kept asking her to buy things for him and him putting items in the cart while she wasn’t looking.

She said to Johnny, “That’s it! Santa won’t be visiting you because you’ve been naughty, Johnny. There will be no gifts for you!”

Being an adolescent, of course, Johnny was undeterred. His optimism was still unbridled. On Christmas Eve, he employed the flawless strategy of going to bed early, thinking the earlier he went to bed, the earlier Santa would come, even though he was told there would be no such visit.

At 5:00 AM Christmas morning, Johnny got out of bed, ran downstairs, and found Christmas gifts strewn on the floor under the Christmas tree. He found gifts with his name on them and opened them all.

He then ran up to his mother’s bedroom, jumped on top of her, grabbed her shoulders and shook her awake saying, “Mom! Mom! Santa Claus was here! And he gave me EVERYTHING I wanted...even though I didn’t deserve it!”

At that point in the story, the pastor then gravitated toward the manger scene on the altar, pointing to the baby Jesus, telling us THAT is the message and hope of Christmas. Through the gift of Jesus and our belief, we are given everything, including forgiveness of sins and eternal life, even though we don’t deserve it.

It’s in that that we should walk aware, aware of the true meaning of Christmas. Oh, sure. Indulge the kids and their wonderment with visions of sugar plums dancing in their heads and all of that, but also make sure that they, and we, remember what Christmas is really about.

Prayer: Father, thank you. Thank you for everything, particularly the gift of your Son through whom our sins are forgiven and we are given the hope of eternal life. Please grant us the strength to always remember this, helping us to walk through Advent and Christmas clearly aware of it amid all the excitement of the season. We pray this in the name of your Son, our Lord, Savior and friend, Jesus. Amen.

by Pastor Tom Van Duzer

Ed was good at his job, the one thing that he could do. Watch. Ed was a ESO – Eastgate Security Officer – a mall cop. A guy dressed like a State Trooper who walked the mall jiggling door handles. Tykes stared at him. Packs of teenagers taunted him. “Dudley Dooright” they snickered out of earshot. The most exciting part of his day was when he’d escort some older lady to her car before closing.

Mostly he watched. It was what his life was. At home he’d plop his overstuffed body into a similar chair and watch reruns until 3 a.m., then sleep long past when Ann and the kids left for the day. Then he’d get up and surf the internet until work at 3 in the afternoon. Even the surfing was boring. He’d just click from web site to web site – watching. He tried hobbies. Woodworking sounded interesting, but he made so many mistakes that it was easier to just watch it on YouTube. That guy had all the tools and could build a project in 30 minutes. HE never cut his board short or ran out of glue.

The week after Thanksgiving Ed was in the security office having a donut and diet coke. He was staring at a little Christmas display on a creaky card table. It was an Advent wreath. James, a young part-time officer found it in the dumpster behind the Christian store and asked the manager if he could have it. It was plaster painted gold and purple with four scuffed candles at the corners. The word “Watch” was carved under the only candle that had been lit so far. Actually, it said “Wat” – most of the “ch” had chipped off, why it was in the dumpster. “Watch” – that was what Ed was good at – watching life go by. Big deal!

James always bugged Ed about religion. James was a student at a local seminary – studying to be a preacher. He enjoyed memorizing Bible verses doing his rounds. James was always on time, always cheerful, and – a tough one for Ed – always awake! As Ed sipped his coffee James entered and saw

him staring at the wreath. He said, “Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

“Huh?” grunted Ed.

“I just memorized that verse checking the back lot,” said James.

“That’s what I do for a living, Watch.” Ed’s voice was bitter.

“You know, Ed, watching is more than sitting while life goes by.” Ed could tell this would be one of James’ “earnest conversations” but for once didn’t seem to mind. “Watching is an active thing, like the time that you did CPR on the heart attack victim. If you hadn’t been there and prepared, he would have died.”

“Your candle is about CPR?” Ed smirked.

“No,” James replied, “but it is about watching and waiting until Jesus comes. There were plenty of people in the Old Testament times who watched for God to keep his promise. Then on Christmas day, zap, right before their eyes – he came. But even more folks weren’t watching and missed it! I guess it’s a good thing that we are watchmen. ‘My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning,’ That’s from Psalm 130”

“Ann and the kids go to church – sometimes I go along.” For one of the first times Ed tried to sound religious.

“It’s not just about showing up,” James said, a little bit softer. “It’s about expecting God to keep his promises. You know, he promised to wash away sins through His Son Jesus. He also promised the gift of heaven to those who believe. He even promises to fill our lives up. Jesus said ‘I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.’”

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“By watching?” Ed asked. He was starting to get into it.

“Yeah. Watching is so much more with God,” James replied. “It’s trusting God for His promises and knowing he’ll do what he says. The church stuff - worship, Bible study, and even food pantry are done watching God work among us with His love.”

“This is the first time I don’t feel bad about being a mall watchman.” Ed smiled.

“Ed, why don’t you and your family come to church Christmas Day with my wife and I?” James ventured. He’d asked before, but this was different. Ed laughed. “As long as I can watch.”

Walk Aware

by Lara West

Ever since we chose this year’s Advent theme in mid-September, I have been thinking about what it means to “walk in the light of the Lord.” In our modern world, walking is often a leisure activity or a form of exercise. In the time of Jesus, it was necessary in order to get from place to place—a form of transportation.

Although my work as Trinity’s Music Minister and Organist is my primary job, I live an hour north of the Mission campus in Atchison, KS. Because of this, I spend at least six hours a week in the car. I associate words such as “alert” or “aware” with my primary mode of transportation, driving. Accidents can happen quickly if I’m not aware of the other traffic or of a deer jumping out from the side of the road.

Do modern Americans need that same type of awareness when walking? If walking is a time for relaxation or exercise, shouldn’t it also be a time to relax our minds?

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, I have been walking more. Some of you have seen me walking near Trinity on Sunday mornings between the 8:30 and 11:00 services. Because of those weekly walks, I became aware of the neighborhood. I can show you the house where a Dr. Who fan lives, the yard containing a gingko tree, and the way the houses alternate between having a large back yard and a large front yard. I can point out the upstairs window where a dog often enjoys the sunshine. On my walks in Atchison, I became aware of a family of foxes roaming the neighborhood, learned the name of a neighbor with a well-tended yard, and basked in the glory of the bright fall colors. I found an empty lot framed with tangled, neglected irises, and a set of steps leading up to a field of grass, with few other signs of the home that must have once stood there (see photo).

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Sometimes being aware means keeping our guard up, but sometimes it means slowing down enough to see what is already around us. If I had driven through those neighborhoods where I walked, I probably would have never noticed all of those interesting sights. My awareness required the slower, more deliberate action of walking.

“Walking aware” can be lived out in multiple ways. Beyond our methods of transportation, what if we slowed down our conversations, leaving time to ask one more question that demonstrates care and concern for the other person? In this holiday season, what if we slowed down our busy lives to make more room for our faith?

Our gospel lesson for the week advises us, “Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28, ESV). If we straighten up and raise our heads, we walk aware— aware of God’s creation, aware of others around us, and aware of God’s rich promises and blessings.

Prayer: Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Straighten us up, raise our heads, and make us aware, as we walk in your light. In your name we pray. Amen.

Stand and Look Up

by Al von der Linden

“And there will be strange signs in the sun, moon and stars. And here on earth the nations will be in turmoil, perplexed by the roaring seas and strange tides. People will be terrified at what they see coming upon the earth, for the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then everyone will see the Son of Man coming on a cloud with power and great glory. So when all these things begin to happen, stand and look up, for your salvation is near.”

Luke 21:25-28 (NLT)

For centuries, God’s people watched and waited for their promised Messiah to come and save them. God had promised a Messiah to deliver them from their sin ever since Adam and Eve first sinned, and He continued to remind His people of that promise through His prophets. Watching and waiting for their Messiah had become a lifestyle for God’s people and a big part of their culture.

The people of God trusted His promises, so when their Messiah finally came into this world, many were expecting Him and were ready. Awaiting the Messiah, Jesus’s mother treasured the angel’s announcement of His arrival as her son. Awaiting the Messiah, Simeon praised God that the baby he held in his arms was his Savior. Awaiting the Messiah, the disciples accepted His invitation to follow Him.

As Jesus approached the end of His time with His disciples, He spoke to them about the end times of the world. Jesus told them the world will be mired in turmoil, confusion and fear, and that He will return to deliver His people from the forces of sin and evil. So, when God’s people see the dreadful signs and tribulations that mark the last days, they should rejoice knowing that Jesus will return. Jesus told his disciples to “stand and look up” because they will soon be united with Him forever.

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Rather than looking up, it seems that most people these days are looking down. People are looking down at all the work in front of them. People are looking down at other people. People are looking down in despair. And just about everyone is looking down at their phone. We find so many reasons to look down at things in this world, and not enough occasions to look up to God.

Amid the chaos, fear and uncertainty in today's world, Jesus calls His followers to stand and look up. He calls us to live in awareness and expectation of His return. When we are truly aware that Jesus is coming, we think in higher terms and focus on what matters most to God. We become more aware of God's presence in us and among us, and we spend more time with Him in prayer and in His Word. We become more aware of the needs of others and watch for ways to help. When we are more aware of God, we live differently.

Now is the time for you to stand and look up, for your salvation is near!



*Walk in
Repentance*



Walk In Repentance

by Pastor Ron Flengen

“John the Baptizer was in the desert telling people about a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Mark 1:4 GWT

[Jesus] said, “The time has come, and the kingdom of God is near. Change the way you think and act, (i.e. “repent”) and believe the Good News.” Mark 1:15 GWT

Surprise! Advent is NOT about getting ready for gift giving, feasting, visiting, traveling to see family, etc. It’s about getting ready for the “advent”, that is, the arrival of our Lord. John the Baptizer, as the divinely-appointed forerunner of Jesus the Christ, shows us how it’s done. He brings “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Jesus himself announces the keynote of his ministry at the very beginning: “Repent and believe the Good News.” The “God’s Word for Today” version takes the liberty of translating that one word “repent” as “change the way you think and act.” It is, indeed, a loaded word. It’s about change, change in the way we think, in the way we perceive things, in the way we act. It’s about leaving some things behind and moving forward into something new. The words translated “repent” and “believe” are both in the present imperative. They mean “BE repenting” and “BE believing.” They are both on-going. They are a “walk” in life, a way of living. It’s a daily walk of recognizing and confessing faults and weaknesses, receiving God’s forgiveness in Christ, turning away from patterns in life that don’t fit who we are in Christ, recognizing the Holy Spirit’s power to change our minds and attitudes about things that may put up barriers to living the life God is giving us each day.

Believing the “good news”, the Gospel, is not merely an act of profession as when we recite a creed and say “I believe this”. It’s not just what we believe, but living in faith, in trust, in confidence in God’s promises and with courage to act on them. It’s living the good news that you and I can move off the dead

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center of always looking into ourselves for answers, of anxiety about who we are and who cares about us. It’s living the good news that we have been favored by God in the advent of his Son, Jesus. It’s the good news that he sent Jesus with no prompting or pressure from us, sending him as a pure act of unselfish, unconditional love, sending him to die so we wouldn’t and to live again so we could walk confidently and triumphantly out of the tombs of guilt and fear to live every day with hope.

To “walk in repentance” means joyful readiness when we “will be taken in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air”(1 Thess. 3:16) as he comes to join those who have died in Christ with those who are alive at his final advent. To “walk in repentance” means to walk away from despair and gloom and forward with Jesus who comes to say to us every day, “Repent and believe the good news... Come, follow me. I have great things in store for you.”

Prayer: Lord Jesus, in faith I turn from sin and all that contradicts my baptism into life with you. Walk with me in my daily life that, in the power of your Holy Spirit, I may always believe the Good News of forgiveness and peace with God through you. Amen.

Walk in Repentance

December 06

by Courtney Jacob

This era of Pinterest, Hallmark Christmas movies, and Facebook sharing makes it really easy to feel imperfect and subpar at Christmas. If you didn't already feel pressure to find the perfect gift for each family member, to create custom teacher gifts and clever gifts for all delivery persons and service providers, or experience all the Christmas traditions every year, these cultural mediums can really expose your inferiority and failure.

I write all this a bit tongue-in-cheek. I enjoy Hallmark movies for what they are and appreciate special Christmas traditions. I understand the value in expressing appreciation for the often underappreciated. All these things are well and good, and quite often well intentioned, but it can also create a Christmas trap of comparison and when we don't meet unspoken or self-imposed (or dare I say imagined) expectations, it can threaten to steal our Christmas joy.

Or maybe what threatens to steal your Christmas joy is more personal and intimate: grief, broken relationships, harsh words, lies told, abuse, pain...

At these moments, it's time to revisit and reflect on a passage you won't find in a church Christmas pageant or Sunday School Christmas program: Matthew 1.

It's that passage that lists name after name (some of which are quite hard to pronounce), the kind of passage we scan over in order to get to the familiar, nostalgic stories of angel visits and Christ's birth. But if we slow down, read it, and let our minds and hearts make connections, we'll discover great comfort and affirmation that helps us focus on the real meaning of Christmas.

In verse 2, we encounter Abraham who trusted God enough to leave his family and his country, yet still felt he needed to lie about his relationship with Sarah in order to protect himself from Pharaoh (Genesis 12:10-20) and Jacob, the

deceiver (Genesis 27). Verse 3 reminds us of Judah and Tamar; the mention of Rahab in verse 5 should bring to mind a woman who not only was not an Israelite, but was a prostitute, and feared the name of the Lord enough to protect his spies (Joshua 2). Keep reading and you'll continue to recognize names that connect to stories: Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 1-4), David and Uriah (2 Samuel 11:1-12:25), Solomon, Rehoboam, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah...

If we slow down as we read the names, we can recall the stories the Bible has told us about many of these individuals. In those stories, we encounter imperfect people: women who were nothing by the world's standards, individuals who weren't even Israelites, and men after God's own heart who committed selfish, heartbreaking sins.

And yet, they are integral parts of Jesus' story. God neither writes them off nor glosses over their story. That's why discussing sin and repentance is so very necessary at Christmas, even if it feels uncomfortable and remarkably un-Christmasy. If we spend time recalling the stories behind the names we find in Matthew's record of Jesus genealogy, talking about sin and brokenness at Christmas can become a conversation that, after our initial discomfort, brings us great comfort and encourages us to keep walking toward him in repentance. After all, sin and imperfection are the reason we wait in anticipation every Advent to celebrate Christ's birth. And in his family tree, the lineage of people that lead to his coming, Matthew reminds us that God does not abandon and even includes imperfect people in his perfect salvation plan.

Don't be discouraged, take hope from Jesus' family tree, and confess your brokenness and imperfection to him and walk in repentance. Jesus has come and he is coming. No amount of brokenness or imperfection can stop his coming; and you are part of his perfect story.

Walk in Repentance

December 07

by Pastor Mark Schulz

“And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ And he said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.’”

Genesis 3:8-10

It all began so well. God created the heavens and the earth. He created man and woman as the crowning achievement of His creative activity. And when He had finished, He declared it all “very good” and then rested from His work of creation.

Genesis 3:8-10 gives the reader the impression that there was a time when God would walk in the Garden in Eden in the cool part of the day and Adam and Eve would welcome His arrival. Just imagine the wonder and joy of literally walking with God your Creator in the magnificent world that He had created!

But in Genesis 3, there is no delight in hearing God walking in the garden. Wonder and joy are replaced by fear and dread. What accounts for the dramatic change? Sin. Adam and Eve have sinned, they have disobeyed God by eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil that He had commanded them not to eat from. As a result, the presence of God no longer brings them joy, but rather fear.

The reason for this is because sin separates us from God. Sin alienates us from God. It creates a rift, a break in our relationship with our Maker. This separation, this break, and the resultant fear is just as real for us as it was for Adam and Eve. Like them, we are now afraid to walk with God, we are fearful

because we know we have sinned and that we fall short of God’s expectations. Likely you have had times in your life when you are acutely aware of your own sin. You have messed up in a big way, and now you are facing the consequences of your sin. What to do now? How to handle it? The answer is repentance.

Repentance is prompted by God the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit prompts contrition for our sin—a genuine sorrow that we have sinned against God and against others. But repentance isn’t just feeling sorry that we have sinned. Repentance also involves a change of mind and of heart. It means “doing a 180” and turning back to God, returning to the Lord with all our heart.

It is hard to tell in our modern day, but the season of Advent was originally established as a season of repentance and reflection—a time for believers to return to the Lord in repentance and faith. Martin Luther was correct when he wrote that we “daily” need to repent. Why? Because we sin daily and thus need repentance daily.

Take a moment now to confess your sins to God. Listen to the voice of God the Holy Spirit that calls you to repentance, but also brings to mind the Good News that your sins are forgiven for Jesus’ sake. “Do a 180” and seek to walk today in the light of the Lord. Walk . . . in repentance.

Walk in Repentance

by Beth Stephens

God sent His “messenger,” John the Baptist, to call people to repentance so that their hearts would be prepared to receive Jesus. We are also called to repent and return to the Lord.

Growing up with two brothers, I have plenty of examples of when other people should have sought repentance with me. Times when something of mine was taken, pranks were pulled, or the neighborhood two-hand touch football suddenly turned into tackle. Something would happen, usually our mom would get called and then they would ask for forgiveness. And I was supposed to accept the apology. But how would that prevent the same thing from happening again? It was necessary to show them there would be consequences if they wronged me. It would just depend on the mood of my 10-year-old self.

In Malachi 3, God is promising the messenger John the Baptist is coming. He will be a guide for the people to walk towards Christ. There’s mention of the refiner’s fire, cleansing soap, and casting out of people. What I would like to focus on is verses 6-7, “For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them.” We are saved through the unchanging faithfulness of our Creator God. Not because we have acted in a way to deserve it.

Every time I mess up, and I approach God’s throne and repent, I know forgiveness will be given to me. He will never change. He set up the covenant knowing that we will never be able to maintain perfection. When we repent for the one hundredth time for sassing He does not tease, reject, or persecute me in my brokenness. I never have to wonder what will happen when I seek the Lord in repentance.

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If my brothers had approached me many years ago in repentance for the multitudes of wrongs they committed against me, I do not think forgiveness, mercy or grace would have come to my mind. These days my brothers and I can laugh about our limited understanding of forgiveness. Thankfully, our Lord is not a strong-willed 10-year-old child. In our walk with Him, we can confidently repent knowing that He will never change. His steadfast love endures forever.

Walk in Repentance

by Pastor Luke Jacob

Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

Jonah 3:3-5 (NIV)

The book of Jonah is a wonderful case study on repentance and God’s grace. From the start, its imperfect namesake finds himself rejecting God’s calling and heading in the opposite direction of God’s plan. When a storm arises out of nowhere, his shipmates cast him overboard because they realize that he’s the problem. Everyone remembers what happens next from Sunday school class...a large fish swallows Jonah and he spends 3 days in the belly of the fish. In those three days Jonah has a lot of time to himself - to think about his life choices, to pray to God for deliverance, and to reconsider where and what God is calling him to do. After he was expelled from the giant fish, he was given a second chance to follow God’s calling and go to Nineveh. And this time he reluctantly followed through.

Jonah is literally and figuratively walking in repentance among a very large city of unbelievers. He went to great lengths to avoid this journey. And yet he walks the streets of Nineveh proclaiming its pending doom at the hands of God. Jonah is the living embodiment of repentance as he sheepishly announces God’s intentions after seeing first-hand his own sin and repenting of it in the belly of the fish.

If only the Ninevites knew Jonah’s story... if only the Ninevites knew how painful and gut-wrenching of a walk this had to be for the reluctantly repentant spokesman of God. Jonah didn’t want to walk this path set before

December 09

him. How much enthusiasm or effort did he put forth? And yet his message is heard! The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

Three days in the belly of a giant fish. Three days walking through a city of sinners calling them to repentance. Three days in the tomb for our Savior before his triumphant resurrection on Easter morning!

We walk in repentance today knowing that our sin has been swallowed up on the cross by Jesus. We walk in repentance today in the midst of neighbors and communities in need of hearing Jonah’s message of repentance. We walk in repentance today as we look forward to the day we will walk alongside our Savior upon his return.

Prayer: Dearest heavenly father, thank you for your underserved grace shown to us. Help us to walk in repentance this Advent season as we await the return of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

A Transformed Life

December 10

by Julie von der Linden

In those days John the Baptist came to the Judean wilderness and began preaching. His message was, “Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”

Matthew 3:1-2, New Living Translation

Each year as the holidays approach, I desire to make it more meaningful, to focus on the true reason we celebrate Christmas, to bask in His Presence. And then each year when it’s over comes the realization that there is much room for improvement. Maybe I lost focus along the path of busyness and the Christmas preparations. How can this Advent season be different?

We are given a clue in the theme verse, Isaiah 2:5, “Come, let us walk in the light of the LORD.” In order to stay in his light and prepare our hearts to be open to Jesus, we are called to ‘Walk in Repentance.’

When we repent of our sin, it opens the way for a relationship with God. If my desire is to keep my eyes fixed on Jesus, it will start with an open heart, a repentant heart. As Luther would ask, then what does this mean?

Repentance is defined in the Bible Dictionary as a turning away from sin, disobedience, or rebellion and a turning back to God. It also added that true repentance is a “godly sorrow” for sin, an act of turning around and going in the opposite direction. Several sources point out the precise meaning of repentance is “to change one’s mind.” I don’t know about you, but that sounds VERY thorough and sounds like serious change to me! It’s not being forced to say “I’m sorry” because you’ve been caught, rolling your eyes, and then going back to the same old, same old. (Anyone recall ever seeing two kids being put through this exercise?!) Oh no, it is much more than that. Walking in repentance will be walking away from sin and toward God.

This kind of change is not something that comes naturally to us and we cannot do it by our own power, nor will we do it perfectly or 100% of the time. We need to humbly come before God with an open heart and be empowered by the Spirit. That is the only way we are able to have the strength and wisdom to leave our sinful ways behind us and walk forward in the light of the Lord. An interesting note can be found in the Life Topics Index of the Life Application Bible. Under the topic of repentance is the following: “Confessing and turning away from sin – repenting – is the first step toward receiving God’s forgiveness and moving toward a transformed life.” Transformed is a key word because it represents change, something different than our old sinful ways. A transformed life is a life walking in the light of the Lord.

This is my goal during this Advent season, to be transformed. A journey with eyes fixed on Jesus and an open, repentant heart that leads me to the manger.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, empower me through the Spirit to have a repentant heart and turn to you. Open our hearts as we seek you. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Walk in Repentance

December 11

by Pastor Tom Van Duzer

The sun was starting to set as Chet marched beside County 76. His breath made frosty billows while his mind raced, and his pace quickened. He was SOOO mad at his dad! He'd had enough. He was outta there. Not goin' home, nope. They can cry all they want.

Dad had insisted that he opt out of one basketball practice to do the final rehearsal of the Christmas program at St. Timothy. Coach wouldn't like it and likely he'd be benched. But dad insisted, even though he was the oldest in the pageant. This year he was taking the part of John the Baptist, a departure from the normal shepherd or wise man part he'd had. He enjoyed the acting part, and John the Baptist was a macho guy. Told it like it was. Took no prisoners. But missing JV practice? That was too much to ask!

He envisioned himself giving a John the Baptist scolding to his dad! "You brood of vipers!" He imagined his missing practice like John being in prison. Of course, taking this hissy fit walk would anger mom and he'd end up with his head on a platter... figuratively, at least.

"Chet, is that you?" A car had slowed and pulled next to him. It was Andre, the college kid who helped coach Briggs. "Get in. This road is too busy and it's getting dark. What are you walking out here for, anyway?"

"I dunno," Chet replied as he buckled up. Then, after a long pause he told his story, the whole thing, right there on the roadside.

"I sorta thought that," said Andre after he was done. "You look like me five years ago. I left home Christmas Eve and was gone a week."

Chet was shocked. He thought that Andre had it all together. "Why'd YOU leave?"

"Something stupid," Andre replied. "I wanted to go my own way, so I did. Got as far as the bus station in Omaha."

"Why did you come back?" Chet asked.

"Oh, I didn't want to, but my dad found me. Don't know how, but he did. Just came in the station and said, 'Son, come on home.' What really got me was that when I got home, all the presents were still wrapped under the tree. Mom was there and gave me a hug. That's when my heart started to turn around."

"Musta been tough." Chet mused.

"At first, but then I saw how Jesus loved people who were running from God, it turned me around. In fact, that's what that word 'repent' means. To turn around and go the other way."

"Hey, I thought teachers couldn't talk about religion!" Chet was surprised.

"First, I'm a volunteer, second, we're not in school, and third, you brought it up with your John the Baptist part in the church pageant," Andre replied. "Plus, we all need to turn around sometime."

They sat there by the side of the road. It was cold and Chet didn't want to get out of the warm car. And hearing Andre's story made him think he was walking in the wrong direction. He remembered his line in the pageant "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance." It wouldn't be easy, but he'd have to apologize to his parent. He realized that he was already apologizing to God. "Can you take me home?" he asked Andre.

Andre put the blinker on, waited for traffic to clear, and did a 180. In a few minutes they turned onto Chet's street. Chet could see the cross atop the big blue spruce in their front yard. This year he had been the one to climb the ladder and put it up. As he had come down his dad had put his arm around him, "It's the reason we have Christmas, son."

cont'd on Page 36

cont'd from Page 35

Chet was glad Andre had stopped. It's almost like Andre was a John the Baptist that turned him around and brought him home. Boy, playing the part of John the Baptist would be special this year.



Walk
Joyfully

repentance



As we enter this third week of the spiritual preparation called Advent, perhaps this is a good time to clear up some confusion. At least, the writer of this devotion confesses to some confusion in an earlier day.

Over what?

The Advent wreath contains four candles in a circle signifying God’s infinite love. Three are violet or purple, and one is rose or pink. Some wreaths, including the one in our church, also include a white candle in the middle. As the Advent season progresses, one candle is lighted for each week. Violet candles are lighted for the first two weeks, followed by the rose candle the third week, another violet the fourth week and the white candle on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

At one point, I thought someone made a mistake lighting the rose candle on that third week, thinking that the rose candle was the candle for the fourth and last week. Obviously, I was the one mistaken!

I subsequently learned that the rose candle is lighted in the third week as it signifies joy. The third Sunday in Advent is the Sunday of Joy, or Gaudete Sunday, which is Latin for rejoice. Why that Sunday?

In the early history of Advent, the season was considered one of penitence, with fasting quite common. There was also a ban on festivities like dancing. That fasting, though, was relaxed on the third, or Rose Sunday, as people rejoiced in the coming of the Savior. With the focus taken off penitence, pent up joy came out.

I can only imagine that readings from Philippians are often chosen for the third Sunday in Advent because of the overall joyous theme Paul illustrates

in that letter. And his joy is in spite of the fact that he wrote it during his first imprisonment in Rome, under house arrest for two years as he awaited a hearing before none other than Nero.

His joy came from two sources. One, of course, was his belief in Jesus Christ whom he confessed not just as his Savior, but as his Lord. The second was from his special relationship with the church in Philippi, which was the only church from which he would accept any financial assistance and for which he was most appreciative.

Prayer: Father, thank you. Thank you for everything, but especially for THE gift that surpasses all others, the gift of your son, Jesus, through whose crucifixion all our sins are forgiven, allowing us to walk in absolute joy, unburdened of the guilt of past sins. Keep him in our hearts and minds as we prepare to celebrate his birth. We pray this in HIS name, our Lord, Savior, and friend. Amen.



by Rhonda Synovec

Joy. A word often used as one way to describe how we feel about something. In fact, the definition of joy states it is a “feeling of great happiness”. During this season of Advent, many feel a sense of joy as the celebration of Christmas draws near. There is an excitement that fills the air as we anticipate what the approaching celebrations will bring. We are busy with activities, decorating, festivals, concerts, looking at all the beautiful displays around us, planning special gatherings of family and friends, and searching for just the right gift to give to others. These are part of the traditions we know and love. They are a part of our lives.

It brought forth these questions:

Are we experiencing the true “joy” of the season of Advent?

Are we “walking joyfully” in the anticipation of celebrating the greatest gift we have been given or are we too busy with the hustle and bustle of the season?

Another definition of joy is “a source or cause of great happiness: something or someone that gives joy to someone”. I once read that joy is measured by what we have been given and I was especially drawn to these words - “someone that gives joy to someone”.

That someone that gives joy to our lives is the promised Savior, Jesus Christ, who came to us as a baby that first Christmas and who promises to come again so we may have the free gift of Eternal life. This is why we “walk joyfully” throughout Advent and continue to do so all the days of our lives.

Philippians 4:4 says: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” The joy we know through Christ Jesus is more than just a feeling of happiness. It is a deep joy within us that knows God’s great love for us. A love so great he

sent his son Jesus to be our Savior. It is a deep joy within us that allows us to trust in Him in all things, even when troubles are all around us. It is a deep joy within us that allows us to be content in all circumstances no matter what we are feeling – happiness, sadness, loneliness, anger, despair, hopelessness. It is a deep joy within us that brings us comfort and peace for we know the love He has for us, that he will sustain us, and never leaves us. It is a deep joy that brings us to rejoicing for all that He has done and is doing and because of that we give Him never ending thanks and praise.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18:

“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Ponder and spend time today in these ways;

- 1. Rejoice always – I rejoice in God today for_____
- 2. Pray continually – I pray today for _____
- 3. Give thanks in all circumstances – I give thanks to God today for _____

Now, spend time in prayer with your Heavenly Father and lift up to him all these things knowing he hears, and answers, our prayers in the ways that are best for us.

May we “walk joyfully” in this season of Advent, and throughout our lives, giving praise to God for His great love for us.



Jaywalking/Joy Walking

by Tom Perry

December 14

It is interesting to go to a larger city or airport and watch the people as they walk upon their way. We can often find out the type of day they are having, and sometimes gain insights into their personality, just by observing the way they walk. You can tell if someone is running late and anxious about being on time when they dash across the street with little regard to what is going on around them. There are jaywalkers that mosey across a street seamlessly without a care in the world. They appear to be interested in only their own desires. Some jaywalkers are driven by what they need to accomplish and take the fastest, not necessarily the safest, route. We can often see ourselves in the way jaywalkers walk. The business of the world does not always let us appreciate the beauty of the world or the person walking next to us.

Among the jaywalkers are the joy walkers. In the same bustling environment, people can be seen taking in the sights. They could be tourists from out of town, people enjoying a work break, or people observing the sights and smells as they too, walk along on a busy day. Often their path is safer as they take advantage of pedestrian courtesies. They walk along a well-worn proven path.

In our Faith walk, we have the privilege of being Joy walkers. We are still driven people. People driven to spread the Good News. But, because of what happened a couple thousand years ago, we can walk that path with joy. We always have that friend who will walk beside us. A friend who came as a baby and revealed himself to be our savior.

Into our lives a baby came,
So lovely and so small.
He came empty of riches and fame,
To heed our Father's call.
He came our sinful lives to clean,
Our souls from death He did redeem.
And that is why today we sing,
All joy begins with Him.

The joy that begins with Jesus allows us to be joy walkers every day. We may still be part of this fast-paced world, but our salvation, won by Jesus, lets us journey with joy in our hearts. We can find the peace which comes from God in the meaningful relationships we share with loved ones. The joy which comes from heaven should motivate us to tell the world what he has done. Isaiah 55:12 "For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."

Prayer: Father, may the gifts which come from you cause us to walk in Joy. Lead us Holy Spirit to share the joy which Jesus brings with those we encounter. With joyful thanks we pray. Amen.

joyful

Walking Joyfully

by Makenzie Barker

December 15

“Walking Joyfully” when I first thought about this topic, I thought about being happy and sharing and spreading that happiness. God knew we weren’t going to be perfect but that is why he sent his son Jesus to die on the cross for us and for our sins. So, God wants us to share and spread our happiness and joy to others too. Those were some of the things that I thought of. Then after reading Zephaniah 3:14-20 and Philippians 4:4-7, it gave me a whole new understanding about what “walking joyfully” means.

Zephaniah 3:14-20 says that God is always with us, loves us, and delights in us. Knowing this, we can show our love for Him by praising Him, worshiping Him, and sharing His love with the world. There is not just one way to do that or to show Him you love Him. I love to sing, and singing is one way that I rejoice and praise with God. It brings me so much joy and happiness so you might find me singing a lot.

I also love to sing Christian songs and very often they get stuck in my head and I will sing them for days. I think this is one way that God is showing me He is rejoicing with me because he wants these songs to get stuck in my head. I believe in God and all the things He has done for you and for me and singing is one thing I love to do and I love showing God I care by singing.

I think that is one of the many ways that I rejoice with God and all the things he does for me. Philippians 4:4-7 says that we should rejoice and believe in God and that we should not worry about anything. We should put our trust in the Lord and he will help us get through those worries, doubts, stress, and hard times.

But this can be tough because we all worry sometimes. We also all doubt ourselves at some point and go through hard times. This is especially true for me because I am a huge worrier. I like everything to be perfect and worry if it

isn’t or if it isn’t up to people’s standards. When I started writing this devotion, I was worried that it wasn’t going to be good enough or that people weren’t going to connect with what I was saying. But I prayed to God and talked about my worries and fears. And with his help, and support from Beth and my family, I was able to write this devotion and share it with you.

Expressing my true feelings and love for God isn’t hard. So, walking joyfully to me means that we need to rejoice and praise God in everything we do because that is what he does for us. With us rejoicing we are showing him that we love him and believe in him. It also means that we shouldn’t worry about things because God is here to help us. He will be there for us during our worries, doubts, even our hard times. We just need to trust in God. Yes, it can be hard at times, so go out and rejoice with God and let your worries go. Because God is walking joyfully with you.

joyful

Walk Joyfully

by Pastor Ron Flentgen

December 16

In your presence there is fullness of joy. Psalm 16:11
Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice! Philippians 4:4

I have noted in the past few visits I have had with my Primary Care Physician that in filling out preliminary paper work there is now a question that regularly appears. It is, "Do you have a source of joy in your life?" That is a very good question, though I wonder sometimes if, for some, it seems a bit puzzling and maybe a little difficult to answer. For many, it might seem the equivalent of asking, "Are you happy?" or "Is everything going the way you want it?" Neither of those two questions would be the equivalent of "joy." That would be more like the sometimes artificial "happiness" that is almost forced upon us at this time of the year, often intertwined with nothing but material greed. "Joy", however, is listed as one of the Fruits of the Spirit, that is, clear signs that the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives (see Galatians 5:22).

As we prepare to meet our Lord Jesus during this Advent season and celebrate his coming into the world and into our lives, we can recognize that he comes to make it possible for us to "Walk Joyfully", that is, to live from day to day with joy in our lives. That does not mean we will be happy all the time. No, in fact, our Lord says "Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted." We lament our sins and sinfulness that made his coming necessary, that drove him to suffering and death on that cruel cross in atonement. We do not close our eyes and our hearts to suffering and need in our society and world, but long to bring healing, hope and help whenever and wherever we can.

Ironically, there is great joy as we do that, for in so doing the kingdom or rule of God is entering our midst. With the coming of our Lord there is joy, always joy. It is the deep-down assurance of eternal identity as a child of God, washed in our baptism, cleansed in Christ's blood, at peace with God now and forever.

It is the powerful promise of his abiding presence in our lives as he says to us, "Take this and eat of it. . .take this and drink. . .my body and blood given and shed for you." It is the exhilarating assurance that, no matter what, we are not now nor will we ever be alone, for Jesus comes to us to say, "I am with you always."

In joy we look forward to that day when he will come again and we will greet him as the conquering king that he is, and "so we will always be with the Lord." (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Then we will experience the full meaning of the words, "In your presence there is fullness of joy."

Prayer: Lord Jesus, come into my life every day to give me joy. Help me to share it with others now and when you come again in glory. Amen
Pastor Ron Flentgen

Walk Joyfully

by Gretchen Hollman

Not Guilty

¹⁴ Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!
¹⁵ The Lord has taken away the judgments against you;

Zephaniah 3:14b-15a

As the lawyer awoke from surgery, he asked, “Why are all the blinds drawn?” The nurse answered, “There’s a fire across the street, and we didn’t want you to think you had died.”

Now that I have a daughter in her last year of law school, we hear a lot of lawyer jokes, although she finds them less humorous now that she is becoming one. We have heard a lot from her about the classes she is taking. We listen with interest at many of the stories she tells and are appalled right along with her at the depravity of the world.

The fact is, plain and simple, we live in a broken world. The jokes about unscrupulous lawyers are plentiful, but before we all laugh at them, consider our status in light of the law of God. Criminals are proven guilty in a court of law and are sentenced to life in prison or even death. We are Christians. We can’t be as bad as a murderer, right? Have you ever made a snippy comment on social media? Have you been short with your spouse or sibling? Have you walked by a piece of trash in a parking lot and not picked it up and thrown it away? If we commit the smallest sin, even just one, we are guilty. However, instead of getting a fine or life in prison, we are worthy of being sentenced to death. This is not just physical death, but eternal death in hell, separated from God. The fire we would see out the window like in the lawyer joke would be real flames. The weight of the finality and severity of our inevitable sentencing makes us quake with fear.

December 17

Now, as the judge lowers his gavel, he sentences to you an eternity of . . . unspeakable bliss?—no flames, no excruciating and endless sadness—but an eternity of happiness, pleasure, love, sweetness, beauty, bounty, and life with your Savior. Jesus disintegrates the selfish thoughts you have had and the wrong things you have done. Jesus obliterates every sin you have committed, no matter how large or how small. Jesus takes your guilt and moves it as far away as the east is from the west. Jesus came down from heavenly bliss as a tiny baby to take away your guilt. “The Lord has taken away the judgments against you.” Instead of being led out of the courtroom, cuffed, and ushered into the prison of hell, you are given a robe of white and escorted into paradise. “Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!” Now that’s something to rejoice!

joyful

by Pastor Tom Van Duzer

Sarah couldn't stand any more Christmas music. It was all so happy. "Rejoice, rejoice," She didn't feel like rejoicing. "Joy to the world?" Not for her.

This is the first Christmas for her... the first MS Christmas. Last February she felt run down. Dan was concerned, but with Kyle and Jason into swimming, scouts and church there wasn't time for sickness. She shook it off and played "Mom's Taxi" around swim meets, campouts, and church functions with Big Bob, the Grace Church's youth minister. The schedule drained her. When summer heat hit, she got laid out for a week. Dan called the doctor. After weeks of tests came the diagnosis. MS. Multiple Sclerosis. Sarah had always been healthy. Nothing wrong with this body. Now, a disease that would be with her always. Can't get run down - got MS. Beware summer heat - got MS. Don't plan on being a grandmother - got MS. It was the first MS Christmas. Nothing to rejoice about.

Sarah was unenthusiastic about her next stop. She had to get a permission slip to Big Bob so the boys could do the "Post-Christmas Youth Extravaganza." It wasn't that she didn't like Big Bob, it's just that he was - so cheerful! A mountainous man at 6' 5", 260 pounds, he had the kindest smile and an infectious laugh. He was a Pillsbury dough boy - Sarah didn't know if she should hug him, poke his tummy, or sprinkle him with sugar and pop him in the oven. But that was before God ruined her life with MS.

It was quiet in the youth office. Sarah stood at the door. A clutter of Bibles, a volleyball net in the corner, a video stack on the desk, and piles of Sunday School stuff next to a bucket of squirt guns. Heaped on the desk were boxes of Christmas cookies and fudge. A pecan pie had a slice cut out, a dirty plate the evidence that the crime was fresh. "Hi, Sarah" Bob chirped. As he nudged past in the doorway Sarah looked down into his hand, in it a little plastic box with a window revealing two syringes and needles. In his other hand was a vial

of medicine. He sat in his chair and put the items in a little fridge behind the desk, snapping the padlock on it shut. She must have looked shocked. "I'm diabetic, Sarah. I don't advertise it. But Mrs. Chambers came with the pie and wouldn't leave until I ate something. I had to get a little insulin boost. Not my plan, but I've been trying hard to get her girls into Youth group."

Sarah stammered, "I - I - never knew." Bob smiled, "Everyone thinks my fridge is for my private goodie stash. I lock it so some kid's curiosity doesn't hurt 'em. Plus, ze mystique of ze locked door." He mugged like Inspector Clouseau. She had to chuckle.

"There hasn't been much laughing for you lately, has there?" Bob ventured. "My mom went through that when she lost her legs to diabetes. It was tough when I found I had the disease."

Sarah settled in against the doorpost. "How do you keep so happy, Bob?" She was serious.

"You know, I see Jesus as a joyful guy. The Bible never tells us that he rejoiced, but I think he did. He told us that angels rejoice over one sinner who repents. They take their cue from him. Yet his life was anything but easy. From the beginning he knew he was going to suffer. Shucks, Herod was after him before he was potty trained. He knew the cross was waiting his whole ministry. If he could do that out of the joy of loving me, then there's nothing I can't face for Him - and not rejoice with it." He winked, "Even the specter of pecan pie."

Sarah had to laugh. Her eye caught the Advent wreath on the desk. The kids had been using it for youth devotions. Below the 4th candle was a streamer that said "Rejoice." She sombered, "I haven't been able to do that lately."

"Sarah," Big Bob said kindly, "the Bible says 'Rejoice in the Lord' not 'Rejoice 'cause everything is easy!' We rejoice because Jesus came to take us home with him - where you won't worry about MS and I won't shoot insulin. Until then life will be a hassle. But we can still rejoice!"

Sarah thought a moment. Perhaps it was time to rejoice in the blessings God had given and stop moping about the ones he'd postponed. She appreciated the joy Big Bob had given her boys. She appreciated the joy that Jesus had given her family.

“You’re right,” she said, and really meant it. “Is there anything I can do to help you rejoice this Christmas?”

Bob grinned at her, “Take this pecan pie off my hands.”



Walk
Expectantly



Walk Expectantly

by Pastor Phil Cook

December 19

School is out! The Christmas presents are purchased! (maybe?) Christmas comes at the end of this week, and the anticipation of that celebration is nearing its peak. And yet, as followers of Jesus, we wait for and expect something greater.

The prophet Micah lived and wrote in a time of great expectation, but not in a good way. The nations of Israel and Judah were nearing their end. The people had fallen away; the entire political system had become corrupt and broken; foreign powers threatened their borders. Micah watched and ministered from the rural areas far from the seats of power, trying in vain to call the people to repentance.

And yet Micah lived and spoke with expectation. But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel...He will stand and shepherd his flock, in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.” Though Micah saw the doom and the destruction of Israel, he saw beyond it to the promise of the Messiah who was to come. Bethlehem, this little, insignificant town, yet it would become the birthplace of Jesus. This little, seemingly insignificant baby, who would one day grow up and go to the cross where he would pay the penalty for our sins. And—we dare not lose sight of this—who will one day return in glory to set all things right! Micah expected great things, and as followers of Jesus, so do we.

As followers of Jesus, there is something else we expect: that God will use you! One of the remarkable things about our faith is that Jesus chooses to entrust his most important mission to ordinary people: fishermen, a tax-collector, a zealot; a regional sales rep, a schoolroom teacher, a software engineer. Though you may feel small and insignificant, though you may feel very removed from the seats of power, yet God has chosen you! In his wisdom,

he has chosen you to be the agent of his grace, telling others of what Jesus has done and helping to bring about the restoration that God desires. As followers of Jesus, we expect God to do great things. Walk expectantly, my friends!

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really CAN make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

- From the Four-Fold Benedictine Blessing

Walk Expectantly

by Lara West

This is He whom seers in old time
Chanted of with one accord,
Whom the voices of the prophets
Promised in their faithful word.
Now He shines, the long-expected;
Let creation praise its Lord
Evermore and evermore.

LSB 384, “Of the Father’s Love Begotten,” Aurelius Prudentius Clemens

I grew up in a small Lutheran church in Texas, where my mother was the organist. Our annual Christmas program was followed by a great feast of Christmas treats along with an informal gift exchange, mostly consisting of more home-baked treats. Before this, the children acted out the Christmas story. However, to get to all that “good stuff” we had to first listen to the confirmation students read the Old Testament prophecy portion of the program. In my earlier years, I found it boring and thought it would never end. Later, I noticed that some of the same scriptures showed up in the Messiah performance that was also an annual event in our small town. Eventually, after hearing those words year after year, it finally seeped in: all of those prophecies pointed the way to Jesus. He really was “long-expected.”

In order to expect something, we need information. How did I know to expect treats after the Christmas program? I had information: I smelled my mother’s contributions baking at home, and I remembered past Christmas program experiences. The Israelites’ knowledge of the “voices of the prophets” led them to expect that the promises of “their faithful word” would come true.

See, the Lamb, so long expected,
Comes with pardon down from heav’n.

December 20

Let us haste, with tears of sorrow,
One and all, to be forgiv’n.

LSB 345, “Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding,” 5th-10th century Latin

In the season of Advent, we expect the birth of Jesus, and we also expect Jesus’ second coming in glory at the end of the world. The above hymn stanza is one example that can be read both ways. John the Baptist told his followers that Jesus was the Lamb of God, and urged them to repent. His “solemn warning” (st. 2) leads to words of promise (st. 3): “the Lamb, so long expected, comes with pardon,” giving opportunity for “one and all, to be forgiv’n.”

Come, Thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free.
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel’s strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art,
Dear desire of ev’ry nation,
Joy of ev’ry longing heart.

LSB 338, “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,” Charles Wesley

Who is this long-expected Jesus, and what will he do? Wesley turns to the “voices of the prophets” for answers. Jesus will be born (Isaiah 9:6) to bring freedom and consolation (Isaiah 61:1-2). The “desire of all nations shall come” (Haggai 2:7, KJV) and bring joy (Isaiah 61:10) to “ev’ry longing heart.” When I heard Micah 5:2 as the last prophecy at the Christmas program as a child, I knew we were almost there, almost to the “good stuff.”

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of
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Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. (ESV)

We are almost there. God's "faithful word" promises. The "voices of the prophets" have given us the information, and we can walk with joyful expectation of what is to come.

Prayer:

Our hope and expectation,
O Jesus, now appear;
Arise, O Sun so longed for,
O'er this benighted sphere.
With hearts and hands uplifted,
We plead, O Lord, to see
The day of earth's redemption
That sets Your people free!

LSB 515, "Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers," Laurentius Laurenti

expectantly

Walk Expectantly

by Beth Stephens

Ginkgo trees are my favorite. My fifth-grade teacher did a big project on trees. We had to collect leaf samples and correctly identify its tree. It was a chore. Today, I wouldn't really be able to identify a maple, oak, or cottonwood correctly. But a Ginkgo? Absolutely. The Ginkgo leaf has a unique fan-shaped appearance which makes it easy to identify. Additionally, the tree grows in areas that have been "disturbed" like rocky cliffs, and eroded soil. It is known to withstand city pollution, resist insects, and harsh weather. In 1945, after the Hiroshima bombings, Ginkgoes were one of the few living things to survive. Six Ginkgo trees survived the blast. They survived a bomb explosion. These are cool trees.

Every time I see a Ginkgo tree, I point it out to people. Is it because it is the only tree I can correctly identify? Yes. While most Ginkgoes grow in southern China, there are many Ginkgo trees in Kansas City, and a few on our property at Mission (ask me to point them out to you). From a distance they are incredibly unimpressive. They have a weird triangular growth pattern; the trunk and branches are knobby and awkward. A beauty contest is not the place for these trees.

Sometimes we might feel like a Ginkgo tree. Tested to the extent of our limits. Placed in "disturbed" situations where God expects us to put down roots and grow. The environment takes a toll on our physical and mental health. Knobs from the pains of the world form in our hearts. Growth is awkward. The endurance it takes to survive requires all our energy some days.

Throughout the Bible, God chooses the knobby, awkward, and unique for His purposes. We see this in Mary, the mother of Jesus. She knows how it feels to be uniquely designed, experience awkward growth, and survive many harsh environments. Mary cries out to God and reminds herself and us that God is faithful, strong, and worthy of praise in the Magnificat. Mary was knit together for a unique purpose. So are we.

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God intricately created a Ginkgo tree that was capable of surviving apocalyptic conditions. He does the same with us. We will not be the mother of Jesus, but we are called to be a reflection of Jesus in the world. Just like the Ginkgo trees were a reminder of life after Hiroshima, Christians are little reminders of the great love God shared with us through Jesus. So, on those exceptionally harsh, and awkward days, cry out to God, let Him fill you with His love and purpose.

expectantly

Expecting the Extraordinary

by Al von der Linden

A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, "God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said."

Luke 1:39-45 (NLT)

When Mary, the mother of Jesus, learned that she was expecting a child, she went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who was also expecting a child. Just an ordinary visit between two ordinary women, right? Except this visit was anything but ordinary. Mary's baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth's baby jumped in her womb at the sound of Mary's voice, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit, and then Mary burst into song. Probably not the ordinary visit they were expecting!

However, Mary was expecting more than just a baby. She was expecting God to fulfill His promise of a Messiah. She was also expecting Him to use her, an ordinary person, to accomplish something extraordinary.

God's people were expecting a Messiah ever since Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden. Generation after generation were expecting God to fulfill His promise. When the angel told Mary she would give birth to the Son of God, she believed that God was fulfilling His promise to His people.

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God chose an ordinary teenage girl from an ordinary Jewish town to give birth to His Son. That is not what many people expected, yet it's exactly what they should've expected. The people of God had seen God use the ordinary to accomplish the extraordinary many times before. God used Moses, who had difficulty speaking, to become His spokesman and a leader of His people. God used a prostitute named Rahab to help some spies overtake Jericho. God used Gideon, from the least of Israel's tribes to lead a small army to victory over a massive one. God used an adopted orphan named Esther to become queen and save Israel. And God used a teenage shepherd boy named David to slay a giant and become Israel's greatest king.

Mary accepted her role as God's servant and expected Him to use her to accomplish His purposes. Commending Mary for her belief, Elizabeth said, "you are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said." Like Mary, we expect our Heavenly Father to fulfill His promises. We know that God kept His promise by sending His Son to save us from our sin, so we can live with Him forever. We also trust His promise to be with us always and to care for us.

Like Mary, we expect God to use the ordinary to do the extraordinary because He's done it so many times before. We've seen God show His mighty power through those who are weak and heal the broken through those who are broken. God accomplishes great things with people who trust Him.

Like Mary, we can expect God to use us to accomplish His purposes. As we let God's love flow through us to others, we see simple acts of unexpected kindness make a difference in their lives. As we care for the welfare of other people, we watch for opportunities to share our faith and point them to Jesus. We can expect God to use our ordinary acts to accomplish extraordinary things for His kingdom.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, You have kept Your promises to your people and have used the ordinary to accomplish the extraordinary. During this Advent season, help us to expect You to use us to accomplish Your purposes. Help us, Lord, to walk expectantly. Amen.

Walk Expectantly

by Rhonda Synovec

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

God Uses Regular People

God uses regular, ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things. Believe it or not, He even uses you and me to accomplish his work in the world around us. Don't believe me. Let's take a quick look at some of the people God used to accomplish his work.

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- 1. Moses – someone given up by his mother, raised as royalty until his identity is revealed, then lives in exile as a shepherd. God uses Moses to lead Israel out of bondage and into the Promised Land.
 - 2. Esther – an orphan who becomes queen and saves her people from massacre
 - 3. David – a shepherd boy, youngest of the family, who defeats Goliath and goes on to be Israel’s greatest king. God makes a covenant with David that from his house will come the one who would rule forever
 - 4. The Disciples – fishermen, tax collector, Greek doctor, zealot, betrayer
 - 5. Mary, a young peasant girl chosen to be the mother of Jesus. She is engaged to be married to Joseph and living in a small village called Nazareth
- Place yourself in Mary’s story. Her life suddenly changes when the angel Gabriel appears to her and tells her she is the favored one of God. The Bible tells us she was “greatly troubled”, afraid and confused. A natural reaction and one we would feel as well. Gabriel tells her not to be afraid and she will give birth to the Son of the Most High. She has questions. Who wouldn’t? Gabriel answers those and tells her extraordinary news about Elizabeth, her relative, expecting a child when that seemed impossible.

Gabriel declares these words from verse 37 - “For nothing will be impossible with God”.

Nothing is impossible with God

Let those words sink in. God used Moses, Esther, David, the Disciples, and Mary and he is using you to accomplish his purposes in this world. That’s right – you!

Mary shares she is a servant of the Lord and so are we. Through our words, and actions, even in the smallest of gestures, we can serve the Lord. When we live with servant hearts, we find ways to serve God in all that we do. It doesn’t matter where we are or what we are doing. We can be at work, in our homes, with family and friends, or meeting strangers. As regular people, living our regular lives, we can do extraordinary things for God’s Kingdom.

In this Advent season we are “walking expectantly” to see the promise fulfilled through the birth of Jesus and look forward to the day when Jesus returns so we may live with him forever. We know God’s great love given to us through our Savior Jesus and we walk into the world with servant hearts ready to share that love with others.

Are you ready?

How will God use you? Fill in the blanks below

_____	a	_____	to	_____
Your name		Known as (student/ occupation/etc)		Task/Accomplish

Heavenly Father, use us to accomplish your purposes in this world. Amen.

Walk to the Manger

by Courtney Jacob

It's time. It's finally time.

The anticipation is built up. Through the season of Advent, we recounted the story for each other through cherished Christmas songs, through Lessons and Carols services, through children's Christmas programs, and through weekly Advent readings.

Jesus Christ is born tonight.

Don't fret about where you are or whether you're ready. We're all invited now, wherever you are, and whatever you're doing, to come.

See the star.

Hear the angels.

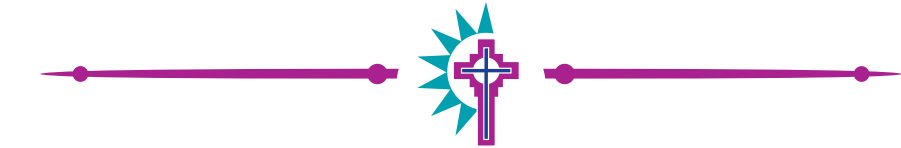
When they saw the star and heard the angels, the shepherds went to see Jesus (Luke 2:8-20).

When they saw the star, the wisemen began their journey to find Jesus (Matthew 2:1-12).

Our paths are different. Our timing is different. But the birth of Jesus Christ is revealed to each and every one of us and we are invited to come, come and meet the newborn Savior.

So come, walk to the manger.

manger
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Walk to the
Manger



Come, see, and hear the “good news that will cause great joy for all the people:

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Luke 2:10-11

God invites you to come, to see, and to hear.

Don't be discouraged that you aren't as far along as someone else or that you're on a different route. Your path and your timing are just that, yours. God calls you, in his perfect time.

Jesus Christ, God's perfect salvation plan, has come into our world.

He's finally here.

Come.

CHRISTMAS DAY

by Pastor Mark Schulz

[Jesus is] “ . . . a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.” Luke 2:32 ESV

Many words were spoken about Jesus at the time of His birth and in the days thereafter. Among those words are words spoken by a man named Simeon 40 days after Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Aged Simeon, quoting from the prophet Isaiah, speaks words of blessing over baby Jesus at the time of Jesus' presentation at the temple in Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph, in obedience to God's Old Testament Law, brought Jesus to the temple on the 40th day. As the firstborn male child, Jesus was “redeemed” from the obligation to serve at the temple when He grew up by an offering being given.

Simeon speaks of Jesus as “a light for revelation to the Gentiles.” Jesus, who in adulthood would call Himself the “Light of the world,” came to dispel the darkness of sin by shining God's light of forgiveness and new life. This purpose for His coming is prophesied by Simeon.

Few would argue with the reality that we live in a world of darkness. We see and hear of countless incidents of evil and ill-effects caused by sin. Because of our own sinfulness, we “fumble around” in the darkness caused by sin, much as we would if we awoke in the middle of the night without the benefit of a nightlight. We need spiritual light! We need from God “a light for revelation.” We need a Savior. Today we celebrate God's gift of Light—the Light of the world—Jesus Christ, born to be our Savior, to call us out of darkness into His marvelous light!

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Think about how so much of the story of Jesus' birth involves walking. Mary and Joseph walked from Nazareth to Bethlehem (perhaps with an assist from a donkey). The shepherds walked to Bethlehem from where their sheep were grazing. The Magi walked from the east to Jerusalem and ultimately to Bethlehem to worship the King of the Jews. Mary and Joseph walked to the temple in Jerusalem in obedience and faith to do for their newborn son Jesus what was required according to God's Law. And here Simeon, guided by God the Holy Spirit, walked to the temple to praise God and to bless Jesus.

On this Christmas Day we, too, are called to "walk." Jesus, the "Light of the world," has shined into our lives and our hearts as we again celebrate His birth. We are called to "walk in the light of the Lord," to be guided by His light as we live as His children.

As you look at the lights on your Christmas tree today, perhaps surrounded by family and friends, remember that Jesus is your Light. He is the One who came to shine light into the darkness, overcoming the darkness of sin for you. May you "walk in the light of the Lord" today—and every day.

Merry Christmas!



Merry
Christmas



