



WORSHIP

Sermon Thoughts for Advent & Christmas

The C18 program has provided a worship plan for the Sundays in Advent, as well as options for Christmas Eve worship and Christmas Day. We have recommended sermon texts for each of those days. On Christmas Eve, it's especially important as the theme for the service comes from Isaiah 9.

In this document, we are sharing some sermon thoughts about that recommended text. These thoughts are shared in a simple bullet-point format. They are not meant to serve as a sermon outline. They are not meant to provide “snippets.” They are certainly not a detailed text study. They are simply thoughts provided by others as part of their personal text study. Our prayer is that these thoughts provide some “feed-in,” adding to the ideas you generate as you work through your personal text-study, outlining, and writing.

This document will be updated so that sermon thoughts come in at least two weeks in advance.

May God bless you as you bring Immanuel to your people in these holy days!

December 2 — THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

SERIES THEME: HE COMES, BEARING GIFTS

THEME OF THE DAY: THE GIFT OF HOPE

RECOMMENDED TEXT: LUKE 21:25-36

POSSIBLE THEME: HOPE TRUMPS OPTIMISM

SERMON THOUGHTS

- It is never a bad idea to explain the season of Advent. We tell people it is a new Church Year. Then we read lessons which often jump to the end of time. That is because Advent sets up the subsequent seasons. Christ's second coming is something believers look forward to, only because they know what happened in his first coming.
- The introduction might explore what people typically think of when they hear the word "hope." The thesaurus lists it as a synonym for optimism, which is a desire for some favorable future outcome. We can say, "I am optimistic it will not rain for the ballgame," or "I hope it does not rain at the ballgame." Those statements are similar, as they both express that desire for a favorable future outcome. The first statement ("I am optimistic...") perhaps conveys a bit more confidence. That said, it still is uncertain. You can be optimistic it will not rain; yet, it might. In Scripture, "hope" is actually stronger than optimism, because it is always connected with the promises of God, promises that cannot be broken. We said optimism is a desire for a favorable future outcome. Advent is all about the future! But Christians have more than optimism that our future is bright. We have hope—*certain* hope—because our hope is rooted in the promises of God, some which are shared in this text.
- Context: this is Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus has been spending much time at the temple. Earlier in this chapter, while his disciples were admiring the temple's beauty, Jesus warned that it would be destroyed. The destruction of the temple will serve as a foreshadowing of a greater destruction Jesus refers to in this chapter.
- The text seems to break neatly into four sections.
 1. The coming of the Son of Man (vv. 25-28)
 2. The illustration of the fig tree (vv. 29-31)
 3. Christ's promises of what will and won't pass away (vv. 32-33)
 4. Jesus' encouragement/application
- Jesus talks about "signs" (σημεῖα) of the end. He had provided others earlier in the chapter. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven" (Luke 21:10,11). Those signs were present at the very time Jesus spoke them. You can find studies online that demonstrate America has been involved in some sort of war or conflict in 93% of the years of its existence. Worldwide, there has *never* been a year where nations didn't rise against nations. There has *never* been a year without natural disasters. Jesus' point in providing such signs is that the end could be at any moment. The signs listed in our text seem to be signs that will be at the absolute end: an unpinning of the forces that hold cosmos and earth together. Jesus brings the signs listed earlier in the chapter and the ones listed in our text together in his fig tree illustration. You can tell that the season of summer is coming by looking at the signs in the tree. Likewise, when we look at the world and its events, we can tell the "season" of Christ's second coming is not too far off. At any moment, we could see the stars fall and oceans drain.
- A malady: we do not live as though the end could be any moment. In his application, Jesus says, "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life." One of the causes of anxiety is the inability to see an eventual "out." There is this belief that some bad will go on perpetually. Jesus promises, all that is "bad" will come to an end. If we recognized that, it would alleviate anxiety. The word translated "carousing" (κραυπάλη) can refer to the nausea or headache one gets from drinking too much. More metaphorically, it could refer to any sort of over-indulgence in the world. "Carousing" and "drunkenness" could be one's way of trying to escape that anxiety. Or, they could simply be the activities of a person who believes happiness can be found in ignoring God's law and gratifying the flesh. Either way, the end result for the individual: they live with a

heart that is “weighted down” (βαρηθῶσιν — “burdened”) with guilt and fear, sensing at least on a sub-conscious level that there will be a reckoning.

- “...the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” — This is with whom the reckoning will be. In his second coming, Christ will not be weak like a baby. He will not even be meek, as he was in his passive obedience. He has reassumed the full use of his power and glory and will use it to the delight of believers and devastation of unbelievers.
- “Truly I tell you...” — Jesus does not speak like a prophet. He does not quote one of the Old Testament prophets, who spoke with authority *given to them* by God. Jesus speaks with authority as God.
- In verse 32 when Jesus speaks of “this generation” not passing away, he is likely referring to a type of people—those who reject the Messiah. Right up until Judgment Day, there will be people who reject that Jesus is the Christ. After Judgment Day, there will be none who reject that truth.
- In verse 33, Jesus gives us a promise which gives us certain hope. “My words will never pass away.” Everything God has promised... everything Jesus ever said... is true. The preacher might list some troubling life situations and corresponding things Jesus said that bring comfort. This list could conclude with the “troubling situation” of the fact that we have not lived with the expectation that the end could be soon. We have let worldly living (carousing, drunkenness) and anxiety enter our lives. Jesus had words to say about paying for that sin of ours: “It is finished.” Those words will never pass away.
- Knowing those promises of Christ is what gives us hope. The line between those who have hope in Christ and those who do not is massive. That is evidenced by how they will respond on Judgment Day. For those who have no hope in Christ or his promises, that day will people to faint in terror. There will be “perplexity” (ἀπορία), people having no clue what to do to escape what is happening. Those who *haven’t* fainted will look for a place to hide. But those who have hope...? Different story? “You know that the kingdom of God is near.” Thus, believers will not hide. “When these things” (i.e. the destruction of the world) “begin to take place” (from the very first moment it is evident what is happening), they will “stand up and lift up your heads.” Believers will watch the fireworks without fear. Why? They know “your redemption is drawing near.” ἀπολύτρωσις here is used as something of a synonym for “salvation.”
- Jesus concludes with things believers will do to live in the “great between” the two comings of Christ:
 1. “be careful” — Προσέχετε ἑαυτοῖς — “watch yourselves.” Be alert to where you are. Acknowledge the temptations before you, know which ones are especially hard for you, and avoid them. Be mindful of the ongoing need for you to be strengthened by Word and sacrament. Do not neglect that which gives sustains your faith/life.
 2. “watch” — ἀγρυπνεῖτε — Literally, “not sleeping.” It has the sense of “be alert,” like one would need to be when standing guard on a night watch. Live with the expectation, “Today is the day Christ comes back.” Do not let the passing of days where he does not lull you asleep. It could be today!
 3. “pray” — δεόμενοι — This participle explains one of the ways we remain alert: we talk to God daily, asking him to give us all we need “to stand before the Son of Man.”
- Possible concluding thoughts: Life in between the two comings of Christ is not easy. There is still suffering and strife, even for (sometimes *especially for*) the believer. Yet, Christians are able to endure and live joyful, purposeful lives. For we have something more than optimism about the future. We have hope for the future. Through the Word we have studied, Christ gives us that certain hope as a precious gift.

December 9 — THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

SERIES THEME: HE COMES, BEARING GIFTS

THEME OF THE DAY: THE GIFT OF PEACE

Note: The theme of the day follows the Advent wreath. The second candle is often referred to as “the peace candle.” You do not find the word “peace” in any of the pericopic lessons. You do, however, certainly see the concept. See the C18: Advent Worship Plan for lesson introductions which identify the type of peace the Spirit offers.

RECOMMENDED TEXT: MALACHI 3:1-4

POSSIBLE THEME: PEACE REQUIRES PREPARATION

SERMON THOUGHTS

- The introduction might ask people to recall what they needed to do to face stressful situations: prepare. A student is about to take an important exam. If she has prepared... has studied... she will be a little nervous. If she *hasn't* prepared, she will be terrified. You are going in for a job interview. If you have prepared—polished your resume, thought through what you want to say, etc.—you will have more peace than if you go into the interview and wing it. We need to be prepared for something weightier than that. As we say in the creed, Christ is coming “to judge the living and the dead.” Malachi asks a chilling question: “Who can endure the day of his coming?” Answer: only one who is prepared. The one who is prepared will enjoy peace even on that day. So let us talk about *how* we are prepared.
- Context: Malachi worked about a century after the return of the exiles. After the return, there had been something of a spiritual resurgence. That was now largely over. Spiritual indifference was the norm, as it had been with previous generations, including among the religious leaders. Ironically, in previous chapters of Malachi, the people pointed to their problems and questioned the presence of the LORD. “Where is the God of justice?” (2:17). Malachi’s response is, essentially, “Oh, don’t worry, you *will* meet him, face-to-face. Are you sure you’re ready?” After Malachi, prophecy is cut off for centuries, until John the Baptist.
- The text says that to prepare us, God is going to send two messengers. First, “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.” Matthew, Mark, and Luke all cite these words in reference to John the Baptist. This first messenger prepares people for the second: “the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come.” Malachi says that this second messenger “will come to *his* temple.” Thus, it is God himself. The word translated “messenger” in “messenger of the covenant” is מַלְאָכִי, which also means “angel” and is the word used in the common OT phrase “the angel of the Lord.” An “angel” who is God himself—this is the promise of the coming of Christ.
- There is a malady implied in the phrase, “whom you desire.” The book of Malachi begins with the people questioning if God really loves them. The fact that he chose them to be his special people is not proof enough. Ultimately, it is not enough for them that God will give them heaven. They want God to come and give them earth too: all the comfort and ease of life they believe they deserve. That is what they “desire”—Messiah as sugar-daddy, not Messiah as Savior. Their “desire” is not accompanied by love, as is evidenced by their blemished sacrifices (chapter 1), comfort with divorce (chapter 2), etc. They are oblivious to the fact that they are owed absolutely nothing by God. The Messiah will indeed come. This is the same “messenger/angel of the covenant” who defended Israel from Pharaoh (Exodus 14) in the form of a pillar of fire. He slaughtered the Assyrians (2 Kings 19). Yet, when he came, he was not going to slaughter still stiff-necked Israel. He was going to purify them.
- This “messenger of the covenant” is the mediator of the new covenant Jeremiah speaks of in chapter 31. “*This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,*” declares the Lord. “*I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,*” declares the Lord. “*For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.*”
- The Messiah’s work here is illustrated as that of a refiner or launderer. One could understand the metaphor to refer to how Christ, by his death, has purified us. He has burned off every impurity from our record. He has washed us of every stain. However, removing our sin was a painless process for us. It hurt Christ plenty: the scourge on his back, the nails in his hands, the abandonment of the God on his soul. The pain of taking away sin was 100% on Christ.

Yet, in this metaphor, he is the refiner. We are the silver, the ones “taking the heat.” He is the launderer. We are the dirty laundry, the ones who need to have powerful soap applied to our lives. Thus, the preacher does not fully share the metaphor if he simply talks about how this “messenger of the covenant” removed our sin by his death. He must also talk about how the Messiah removes all the impurities in our life which threaten our faith.

- Purifying faith is a painful process. No matter what you say the fire and soap represent, there’s pain involved. The fire and soap could be seen to refer to God’s law, which drives us to a healthy pain over our sin and inability to cleanse ourselves. Self-righteousness is burnt up by law’s standards. Pride is washed away in the law’s demands. The purification process also includes the removal of things we love, but which hinder our relationship with Christ. Finally, the fire and soap could be seen as the general hardships of living in a broken world. Such things seem pointless, but in the hands of the messenger of the covenant, they work for good: weakness, forcing us to rely on his strength; sorrow, forcing us to seek a deeper consolation only he can provide. The preacher will let people see that this is the type of God they have—one who allows and even brings the painful fires needed to purge our faith of impurities, so that we might avoid a greater, eternal fire. Our God loves us enough to prepare us to stand on the Last Day, so that we might face that day with peace, not terror. Perhaps an illustration is of the parent who never disciplines his child. The parent might even think this is the result of love. “I love them too much to discipline them.” And in sparing the child that smaller pain, the parent opens the child up to a greater pain when he grows up and is utterly unprepared for life. God loves us too much to leave us unprepared for the judgement.
- Verses 3 and 4 have multiple applications. God does not save us from destruction just to keep us from destruction. He saves us and sanctifies us so that we might once again fulfill the purpose for which mankind was created: to love and glorify God and to be a blessing to his fellow man. The priesthood would be purified. This stresses that God’s public ministers today need purification just as much as the people. It also stresses the universal priesthood, that all who are saved will also serve the LORD. Both justification and sanctification are God’s doing. (Please do not use those words in the sermon!)
- In verse 3, the offering that will be brought is *חֲבִירָה*, a bloodless offering brought, not to take the place of the giver, but simply to thank God for his providence. Think of what this is telling us. Christ is going to lead us through a painful purging process, and we will thank him for that. We can do that now to a degree. (Think of St. Peter writing about rejoicing in our sufferings.) But we will do it perfectly on the Last Day, when the trumpet sounds, the skies rend, and all is set on fire. We will face that day having received the gift of peace, and we will be eternally grateful.
- There are obvious parallels between this lesson and the gospel. That lesson tells us that John’s work was to prepare people to meet Christ. Mountains of pride and self-righteousness need to be leveled. Valleys of despair and self-loathing need to be filled in. If there are blockades preventing Jesus from traveling the path into our heart, they must be removed. It is impossible to *not* mention the Baptist when preaching on this text. Yet, this text is really about that second messenger. The application could be made that God is so desperate for us to join him in heaven, he not only gives us the Christ, he gives us called servants to show us the Christ.
- A concluding thought might focus how typically big days are only enjoyed after hard work. A Christmas party is fun, but is preceded by hours of planning. A wedding is a joyous event, but first comes months of hard work. We sometimes erroneously view this life as “the main event.” But it is not. The party comes later. Now is time for the hard work that gets us ready for that party. We have peace now, that which the angels sang about on Christmas Eve. We know that in spite of our sins, God will never declare war on us. We are at peace in that sense. And on that last day, we will enjoy complete peace in the sense of the cessation of all that troubles us. For now, that trouble may still come. But we are at peace knowing our loving God uses that for our preparation.

December 16 — THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

SERIES THEME: HE COMES, BEARING GIFTS

THEME OF THE DAY: THE GIFT OF JOY

RECOMMENDED TEXT: LUKE 3:7-18

POSSIBLE THEME: THE JOY OF REPENTANCE

NOTE: The C18 Advent worship plan erroneously suggested a sermon theme of *Rejoice Always?* That theme fits the Epistle lesson. However, the recommended sermon text for this week is the Gospel. *The Joy of Repentance* is a better fit for the Gospel (or *True Repentance Leads to True Joy* if you prefer to use a statement).

SERMON THOUGHTS

- The introduction could ask people to think about how they view the word “repentance.” Is repentance something that is connected with sorrow or something connected with happiness? When you repent, are you sad or joyful? We probably think of repentance as being good for us, yet overall a sad activity. After all, Scripture says, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret” (2 Corinthians 7:10). Yet in this lesson, John the Baptist teaches that repentance leads us to a deep and pervasive joy. This joy is so overwhelming and powerful that we change the way we think and act. That is ultimately what repentance (μετάνοια) means—a change of mind.
- In transitioning from the introduction, the preacher might briefly share the background of John the Baptist—how he was sent by God to prepare the people to meet the Christ. One might mention how it is clear that John did a lot of preaching and teaching, and yet very little of what he said is recorded for us. What is recorded is a concise summary of his message, found at the beginning of this chapter, read last week. John was “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3). John talked about having one’s sins forgiven. Scripture tells us that baptism was “for the forgiveness of sins.” When Jesus told Nicodemus, “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit,” what baptism could he be referring to other than that of John the Baptist? While perhaps some who came to John were simply curious about this man of odd dress and diet, most were coming out of a desire to have their sins forgiven.
- “You brood of vipers.” In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus speaks these words to the Pharisees and Sadducees. However, Luke tells us this rebuke was not directed only against them. “John said to the crowds coming out...” (τοῖς ἐκπορευομένοις ὄχλοις). ὄχλος is a large multitude of people, especially commoners. The fact that they are called a “brood” (Γεννήματα — offspring, that which has been born) implies a that this crowd has fallen into the sins of their fathers. (Certainly, the religious leaders could also be considered vipers themselves, the ones who had led the people into their sorry spiritual state.) The bigger question for the preacher to wrestle with: what is the reason for this rebuke? The subsequent verses suggest the Baptist knew that their repentance was false, that there was no intention to change their mind or behavior. Ylvisaker writes, “True repentance, the proper metamorphosis of the mind, must produce fruits, must manifest itself in a new moral code, which is expressed in a thorough transformation of the heart.”
- Thus, the malady implied is that one is a viper when they desire and believe it possible to obtain two things: salvation from “the coming wrath” and the ability to continue on in one’s sin. John’s question, “Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” could itself be accusatory, suggesting that the people have been shown *false* ways to escape the coming wrath. They thought empty religious ceremony would help, in this instance, John’s baptism. They thought being descendants of Abraham might help. The Baptist makes it crystal clear, neither religiosity nor genetic connection to the faithful will amount to anything on the day of wrath. What matters is sincere faith, and where faith is alive and well, there will be fruit.
- If one were to try to share the malady in terms of the theme of the day, he might discuss the folly of pursuing two antithetical joys: joy of salvation versus the “joy” that comes by gratifying the sinful nature. Life does not work that way. You cannot enjoy eating all the junk food you want and also enjoy good health. The pursuit of the one precludes the possession of the other. You cannot enjoy large amounts of leisure time and also enjoy being excellent at something (e.g. bring a great basketball player). To be excellent at something meant you must *sacrifice* leisure time to develop skills in that other area you hope to enjoy. There are certain joys that cannot co-exist with someone. If one pursues the joys of the sinful flesh thinking that, by outward shows of religiosity, he will also be able to enjoy heaven, he proves he has been listening to a viper.

- The preacher, in conveying specific law, might ask his listeners if they have fallen into the same trap. Do we ever use the hour we sit in church to excuse our sin in the other 167 hours of the week? Do we think that the 3% of our income we return to the Lord somehow negates the materialism evident in the way we think about and utilize the other 97%? Do we think that because we belong to a conservative, Bible-believing church body like WELS we will escape the coming wrath (forgetting that God could raise WELSers up out of dead stones)? How much of our religious life is about desperately wanting to be forgiven our sins so that we might achieve eternal life... and... how much of our religious life is about wanting to know that sins can be forgiven so that we might continue in them? If there is any viper's poison in us, we need to listen to the Baptist and understand he is not lying. "The ax is already at the root of the trees." There are, right now (ἤδη), individuals who go to church and say their prayers, that a wrathful God is intending to burn.
- A possible transition after this sharp Law: address the fact that the people might be thinking, "This is so heavy." People want positivity. They want joy! But true joy... *eternal* joy... is impossible without first acknowledging the seriousness of one's sin. And one is not serious if they come to church and take the Lord's Supper to salve their conscience over the fact they intend to go straight back to that sin. There is time when sorrow is healthy. James tells us there is a time to "Grieve, mourn and wail"... a time to "change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom" (4:9). This is a sorry far beyond being sorry for being caught in sin or sorry that one will experience negative consequences for his sin. It is the sorrow of knowing that one has offended his Creator and loving Father... the sorrow of knowing one has made himself worthy of damnation. That is a healthy sorrow! If one does not acknowledge his guilt and the seriousness of his sin, he cannot possibly have joy. He will not have joy in the life to come, but he will not really have joy here either! For there will always be an undercurrent of fear of what comes after death. The "joys" of the sinful nature will be pursued not really for the sake of joy, but in a futile attempt to distract one from the fact that Christ is coming to judge. Sin can give us an adrenaline rush. It cannot make us joyful.
- How does one find a greater, lasting joy? The Baptist tells us. We need to focus on one *infinitely* greater—more powerful (one so astounding John does not even feel worthy to help untie his sandals at the end of a long day. John tells the people that he will "baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." If "fire" here refers to judgment, it is the only place in the Scripture where baptism is connected with judgment. Others see this as a reference to Jesus sending the Spirit (and the tongues of flame that appeared on the disciples' heads) on Pentecost. (Note: John is not saying his baptism has no power. He is simply drawing a distinction between him and Jesus. John baptized as God's servant. Jesus is God himself. This might be too minute a detail to dig into in a sermon.) However, there is no reason to believe that all John talked about was Jesus' work on Pentecost. "With many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news (εὐηγγελίζετο) to them." He told them "the good news" of *all* that the Messiah would do.
- A possible way of preaching the gospel specific to this text: expand upon the tree metaphor of verse 9. Have people picture their lives as a tree. How healthy does it look? How tall is it? How much fruit is on it? Now, have them picture Jesus as a tree. How majestic is *that* tree? How much fruit would be on *it*? Considering John describes fruitfulness in terms of generosity and kindness and compassion, the Jesus-tree would have branches so heavy with fruit, they almost touched the ground. Yet, when God looked at our scarce or absent fruits... when he picked up his ax and walked determinedly towards us... Jesus begged, "No, Father! Not them! Cut me down instead." On the cross, we see God swinging the axe of justice. In Jesus words, "Why have you forsaken me?" we hear him being "thrown into the fire." The fruitful tree was cut down. The fruitless trees were spared. It would be a story of pure sorrow, but for the fact that just like the trees that look so dead this winter, the Jesus tree came back to life... even stronger and more beautiful than before. When that fact sinks in—that God loves you... God wanted you... God chose you... God was willing to pay anything to spend eternity with you—it melts our hearts. We are joyful that "The LORD has taken away [our] punishment" (Zephaniah 3:15). We are overwhelmed to see that, not just in words, but in his actions, he proved he was serious when he had his prophet say, "He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love" (Zephaniah 3:17). So we ask, "What should we do then?"
- John told us what we should do. In our baptism, Jesus clothed us in a white robe of righteousness. We show we value that robe. We strive to keep it clean. Note, John does not call for any activity of heroic proportions. He does not say the necessary fruit is to become a missionary to a foreign country... or to sell everything we have to support the poor or work of the Church. We simply strive to reflect the love Christ showed us in our dealings with our fellow man. We live for the one who died for us. We struggle with all the strength given to us by Christ when he baptized us with the Spirit to leave behind the sins that caused his death. A possible illustration: Imagine a thief broke into your home, and when confronted by family member, grabbed a knife and stabbed him to death. Would you use that same knife to carve the next year's Thanksgiving turkey? You would want to toss aside that which contributed to your loved one's death. Likewise, we want to toss our sins aside, knowing what they did to our loved One.
- Possible concluding thought. Those who said repentance has sad connotations weren't wrong. You just were not completely right. True repentance concludes with the joy of knowing how much your Savior loves you... the joy of gasping the perfect future that awaits you. It results in living a joyful and thankful life, one that is full of fruit. ⁷

December 23 — THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

SERIES THEME: HE COMES, BEARING GIFTS

THEME OF THE DAY: THE GIFT OF LOVE

RECOMMENDED TEXT: REVELATION 12:1-6

NOTE: This is the supplemental lesson suggested in *Planning Christian Worship*. It was chosen because of Advent 4 falling on December 23. The juxtaposition of this lesson with Luke 2 is powerful. The reading of these two lessons will be only 36 hours apart.

POSSIBLE THEME: A WONDROUS SIGN SHOWS WONDROUS LOVE

SERMON THOUGHTS

- The introduction could have the preacher talking about how nativity scenes are often portrayed as beautiful and peaceful. In reality, the situation was ugly; the manger, unsanitary; a bloody birth in straw, risky. This juxtaposition will set up some listeners, especially long-time Christians, who have probably heard this before. “Yes, yes. *The manger wasn’t all clean and pretty. It was dirty and disgusting for Mary and Joseph and the baby.*” That simply enhances the “reveal” of this introduction. It is even worse than being dirty and dingy. The second lesson for today lets us see Christmas Eve as God the Father saw it. It is the story of a pregnant woman about to give birth, yet is the stuff of nightmares. A baby-eating monster is also there, standing “in front of the woman who was about to give birth,” just waiting for dinner to be served. The preacher might announce that before we spend Christmas Eve focusing on the beauty of that event, we must spend this final day of preparation looking at the horror of Christ’s birth. For it is precisely because of this monster that Christ’s birth is so needed. It is this dragon that makes this birth “a wondrous sign that shows wondrous love.”
- The transition might briefly explain apocalyptic literature. A perhaps-helpful comparison is that of apocalyptic literature to Impressionistic painting. Claude Monet never intended to paint something the way it actually looked. Instead, he used colors and texture to try and impress upon the viewer the emotion he felt when he looked at whatever it was he was painting. Likewise, apocalyptic literature is not meant to convey how things actually/literally are. For example, this text is not teaching us there is a literal/actual dragon. Instead, apocalyptic literature uses things like vivid images and numbers symbolically to convey the emotional reality behind an actual event. Here, we see that behind the actual event of Christ’s birth, there is a terrifying reality.
- The preacher will have to walk the people through symbolism of this lesson. If he doesn’t, the listener may let their mind dwell on the symbolism, speculating on its meaning, rather than listening to the preacher apply the meaning to their lives. There are plenty of commentaries that go into great detail for each of the following. The preacher will want to just touch on the highlights.
 - * Given that the child being born here is Jesus, one might conclude that pregnant woman is Mary. However, she wears “a crown of twelve stars on her head,” twelve being the number of God (3, Trinity) multiplied by the number of man (four corners of the earth, four winds, etc.). Moreover, this woman has some authority over all else in Creation, for she is using the moon as a footstool. Thus, this woman is the Church—believers who are eagerly waiting for the special, promised child.
 - * Later on in this chapter, the text tells us that the “enormous red dragon” is Satan himself. The seven heads represents that he wants to take God’s place, 7 being another combination of the number of God and number of man (3+4). The crowns he wears are *διαδήματα*, a crown that is meant to connote power and was used by various pagan rulers. We get the impression that is painted. Satan is an extremely powerful creature that wants to rule over us in God’s place.
 - * The “third of the stars” that are swept out of the sky seem to represent the other evil angels who joined in Satan’s rebellion. In chapter 9, Satan himself is pictured as a star falling from heaven. Again, apocalyptic literature: we are not being told that exactly one third of the angels fell, but we get the impression! A third is not the majority, but it is not a small percentage either.
 - * Satan knew that the coming Messiah would stand in the way of his desire to rule over mankind. Thus, he wanted to strike as soon as possible. Hence, the picture of the dragon wanting to eat the child “the moment he was born.” The preacher might reference Herod’s slaughter of the innocents, an event so twisted and dark one sees demonic

fingerprints all over it.

- * The child “who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter” brings to mind Psalm 2: “You will break [the nations] with a rod of iron” (v9). There is no explanation given, just the statement of the inevitable. The dragon might like to usurp authority over the Creation. He will not have it. It remains, now and forever, under the reign of Christ.
- * In John’s vision, Christ’s birth folds immediately into his ascension. He is taken “up to God and to his throne.” There, having reassumed the full use of his divine power, he is way beyond Satan’s ability to harm. The dragon must turn his attention to the woman, i.e. the Church.
- * 1,260 days is made up of 42 months (mentioned in chapter 11) averaging 30 days each. 42 months is half of 84 months, which is how many months are in seven years. Seven is a number that represents the interaction of God and man. So seven years would represent all the measurable time (i.e. before eternity dawns on Judgment Day) when God interacts with man. Half of that time would be what we sometime call a testamental “era.” Since this is *after* Jesus has ascended, this 1,260 days would represent the New Testament era. In this era, believers on earth are not home, but only wandering in the wilderness... the desert... eager to go home. Yet, this is a place “prepared (ἡτοιμασμένον) for her by God.” There is the promise that the Church “will be taken care of” (τρέφωσιν, which has the idea of being fed or nourished). God has us right where he wants us currently to be, and he meets all our needs, including keeping us safe from the dragon.
- So what is the malady? Set in the context of the theme of the day—The Gift of Love—might the malady simply be not seeing Christ’s birth as “a great sign” (σημεῖον μέγα) of God’s love? Instead, we create false standards... false metrics... of what would “prove” that God loves us. We need to understand that while the mother of this baby is mentioned in our text, he also has a Father! The preacher might ask parents to recall a time they saw their child in a moment of peril. The parent’s heart stops. They cannot breathe. We do all we can to protect our children. However, God the Father *willingly* sent his one, true, perfect child to face an unspeakable horror. Why? So that he might adopt us as his children. So that the dragon might never harm us or our loved ones. Revelation 12 lets us better understand John 3. Everyone knows that famous passage: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...” That passage deserves careful thought. Many of our listeners believe that the “so” there means “so much,” i.e. “God loved the world so much...” That is not accurate. Οὕτως means “in this manner” or “in this way.” Thus, that famous verse says how God showed his love. What is the proof that God loves you? It is not the size of your bank account, not the state of your physical health, not the absence of worldly problems. God proved his love to you “in this manner”—“he gave his one and only Son.” If those words do not take your breath away, you need only look at this “great sign” with eyes of faith. See what it means to “give” his Son. Pastors will often say, “The King of Kings did not get a golden crib, but just a dirty manger.” And? At least the donkeys and the sheep were not likely to eat the baby! What God shows us here in Revelation 12, *that* is what makes the phrase “he gave his one and only Son” so astounding.
- What is the gospel in this specific text? Certainly, it includes the fact that God is willing to pay any price to save us. If one were to think, “Well, the Father knew that the dragon would not get Jesus,” that is true enough. Jesus would be “gotten” by worse than the dragon. When our guilt (including the times when we have used false metrics to measure God’s love) was placed on Jesus, he was devoured not by the dragon, but by the wrath of a holy God.
- There is also good news in the promise of continued care while we roam “the desert.” We view our station in life as “a place prepared...by God,” a place where we can serve him and our fellow man while we wait to join the child that new reigns from his throne in heaven. Life is a desert isn’t perfectly comfortable. Yet when pain comes our way, if we have seen this “great and wondrous sign,” we don’t question God’s love. That has been proven beyond all reasonable doubt.
- The conclusion might ask the listener to keep this text tucked away in the back of his mind when he returns to church for Christmas Eve. Encourage the listener to imagine the dragon when he looks at a nativity scene. Why would we do such a thing? Not to be morbid or macabre. But it is only when we remember how dangerous it was for Christ the second he entered our world... only when we remember who he was coming to fight and what he was coming to do... do we understand the size and scope of this gift of love we have been given. As the hymnist says, he “neither crib nor cross refuses.”

December 24 — CHRISTMAS EVE

THEME OF THE DAY: A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

RECOMMENDED TEXT: ISAIAH 9:2-7

SERMON THEME: A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

SERMON THOUGHTS

- A major thrust of C18 has been to encourage WELS members to invite their unchurched relatives, friends, co-workers and neighbors to Christmas Eve worship. If your congregation has participated in C18 and the Lord blesses the efforts of your members, the preacher must understand that a fair number (hopefully many!) of the listeners that night do not really understand the person and work of Christ, nor why it is important that they be connected to him through faith. This text provides a wonderful opportunity to explain both to them. The contrast between light and darkness is sharp. They have nothing to do with each other. When light advances, darkness *must* retreat, and vice-versa. Likewise, this is a sharp contrast between the life with Christ and the life apart from him. The metaphorical concepts are rich. Darkness is cold and scary and lonely. Light drives away fear. It brings knowledge, letting you see what is *really* around you. It provides warmth. Light is necessary for life.
- A possible introduction: ask people if they think of the world as a dark place. Your unchurched guests (and many members) would probably think that is a bit too harsh. They would say the world is flawed, yet not pitch black. That allows the preacher to transition into the text, where Isaiah would disagree with them. He says we live in “deep darkness.”
- This introduction lets the preacher transition into a brief setting of context. Judah as a very dark place. The people of Judah, whom Isaiah served, would be threatened and eventually invaded by a nation that was not afraid to make examples of the conquered: using torture; piling up the heads of the slain in a pyramid. Read through Isaiah and list the things the Almighty rails against. People do not care for one another but are always fighting “neighbor against neighbor.” There is rampant substance abuse, as people are considered “heroes at drinking wine.” There is widespread sexual immorality. The country is full of poor, and yet there is no mercy for them—no compassion. There is no respect for the elderly, but instead they are mocked. Many people have walked away from true religion and have turned to the occult. The preacher could point out that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Do we not see abhorrent violence in terrorism? Do we not see the collapse of the family and the embrace of an “anything goes” sexuality? Do we not see neighbors turning on one another for a variety of reasons, including that they belong to the “wrong” political party?
- There will still be some skeptics who say, “Sure, we have problems. But is it that bad?” Isaiah skewers that question with the words he uses. He first uses חֹשֶׁךְ, a common word for “darkness.” It can symbolically mean “distress” or “dread” or even “ignorance.” It is a broad word that can connote many negative things. But then Isaiah switches to the word צִלְמָוֶת, translated “deep darkness” here. Yet in your text study, you will see that the word can refer to a “death shadow” or “the shadow of death.” The preacher might say, “If you’re old enough, you might remember that the King James Version said, “on those living in the land of the shadow of death.” The preacher might point out that it is the same word used in the Good Shepherd Psalm, “...I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...” Typically, when preaching to prospects/the unchurched, making a point of the original text is not advisable. Here, it is perhaps necessary because of the progression in thought. To those who would scoff at Isaiah’s claim that the world is full of darkness (חֹשֶׁךְ) and would claim, “It’s really not that bad,” Isaiah would ask, “Oh? Are you not dying?” The inevitability of death casts a shadow—a gloom—over everything. Take the Christmas dinner. You have the entire family gathered around the table. Stop eating for a moment and embrace reality. Someone sitting at that table will see every other person present put into the ground. If that is the ultimate reality, that fact casts a mighty big shadow over the joy of that dinner.
- It gets worse. Isaiah says we “walk” (הָלַךְ) in darkness, i.e. we stroll around in it casually. This is not something we were thrust into kicking and screaming. We willingly *embrace* it. If your congregation is using the *Lessons and Carols* version of Christmas Eve, the preacher might help people recall the words of St. John read earlier: “people loved darkness instead of light.” The preacher might provide some examples showing that when faced with a choice, we tend to gravitate toward the self-serving one. An example: someone wrongs us; there is a part of us that “loves” getting even.

- The transition to the gospel: the preacher might point out how bleak the situation is. The world is a dark place. We tend to think we can make it better. We think we can rid the world of things like violence, oppression, poverty, and racism. Yet can we even drive the darkness out of our own hearts? Perfectly? Permanently? Can you stop yourself from aging? From dying? If we cannot rid our lives of darkness, why would we think we can rid the world of it?
- The good news: a light has dawned! This light is not something man produced. It just appeared. It “dawned.” This light is not a program. No program can rid the world of darkness. This light is a person. Specifically, it is a baby boy. “To us a child is born, to us a son is given.”
- This is a human being, for he is born (יָלַד) of a human mother. Yet he is more. He is also God, as seen by the titles and responsibilities he is given. The preacher will probably want to move briefly over the titles and how they demonstrate Christ’s divinity.
 - * Wonderful Counselor — Unlike all other counselors whose advice is tainted by the fact that they do not know everything, this counselor does know everything. (God’s omniscience.)
 - * Mighty God — This child can do anything. (God’s omnipotence.)
 - * Everlasting Father — He is the author and source of life. He has the compassion of a father. (God’s provision.)
 - * Prince of Peace — He is able to create perfect harmony, even between a holy God who hates sin and people who sin every day. (God’s mercy.) The preacher might point out that this is what the angels sang about on that first Christmas Eve. “Peace for all peoples,” brought by this newborn prince.
 - * “The government will be on his shoulders.” Not a government. This child would not be king over Israel. He would be King over all nations, all peoples.

The Light in the darkness is God in human flesh, come into our dark world. That is what we see in the manger. That is the one about whom the angels sang.

- The preacher might ask the question, “Why?” Why did this “light” need to be both God and man? Faithful members know, but will never get old of hearing it again! But your prospects and straying members need to come to grips with the following: if God wanted to just tell us how to think about darkness/sin, he could have just sent a man. That is what he did with the prophets, who gave us God’s Law which shows us how to live a bright, beautiful life. (We simply do not follow the law.) If God wanted to give us an example of how to live a bright life, he could have just sent an angel. In this holy season, we hear of God sending angels all the time, like Gabriel to Mary. God could have just said, “Everyone, look at how compassionate and thoughtful Gabriel is. Look at how he always thinks of others before himself. Look at how his entire existence is about giving me glory. Just live like Gabriel.” But that was not enough. We needed one who could snuff out the darkness. We normally think of light being “snuffed.” But we needed darkness—sin and its consequences, including death—to be snuffed out. That required the Light to be the God-man. The Light needed to be man, so that he could be sacrificed for our sin. That baby needed a human heart, so that it might stop beating. The child needed blood in its veins, so that it might be shed. The Light needed to be a man, so that the sacrifice made when his light was snuffed out was valuable enough to pay for the sins of every man, woman, and child who ever lived.
- The preacher wants people to reach this conclusion. There are all sorts of darkness in the world. We see it when we look at economics or politics. But we also see it when we look at the selfishness within our heart. We see it in the pain that we cause others, including people we say we love. Our words and actions can leave a coldness (which goes along with darkness). Moreover, there is this shadow that is getting closer and closer to us. When it falls over any part of us, we die. At that moment, we stand before our Maker and are judged. Even in this broken world, there are moments of levity that can distract us from how dark the world is. But if Christmas is going to be more than nostalgia... more than lights and cookies, carols and tinsel... then we need to stop pretending that all is ok. We need to be illuminated. We need to see life... and death... as it *really* is. We desperately need this Light. We badly need this Savior. That is what Jesus came to be. The angel said so. “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you.”
- A possible illustration used by multiple preachers: There are some gifts that one cannot not receive without humility. Imagine for Christmas your significant other gave you the gift of a gym membership for one year. You look at your paunch. You look at the certificate from the gym. You make the connection. Your loved one is telling you something—perhaps something you do not want to acknowledge—in giving you that specific gift. It is no different with this greatest Christmas gift, the Light of Christ. In giving this gift, God is saying to us, “You are so broken, so utterly incapable of cleaning yourselves up, that I will have to do it for you. The situation is so dire, it will require a good man... the perfect man... to die for you.” You do not receive that gift without humility. Our prayer for this Christmas

Eve is that the Spirit would give us just that—humility. We need him to help us understand we cannot cleanse ourselves of sin... cannot overcome temptation... cannot fix our fractured relationships (including the one with our Creator)... cannot outrun the shadow of death (even if we use that gym membership faithfully). We are immersed in too much darkness. But a Light has appeared in the darkness. He *can* do all those things. We need him.

- More! Our lesson says we not only need the Light of Christ, but implies that we need one another. Isaiah says this Light is going to build people into a new nation. “You have enlarged the nation,” which is a reference to the nation of believers. Believers are what Isaiah calls “an everlasting kingdom.” In using such terminology, we see that Christ intends that the vertical relationship we have with him creates horizontal relationships with each other. With the *Lessons and Carols* service, the preacher might recall a previous reading. From John’s first epistle: “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, *we have fellowship with one another...*” This provides the preacher an opportunity to make an application to the worship visitors, as well as the members he sees only on Christmas and Easter. We are not to walk in the light alone! Just as the Father and the Son have lived in perfect community for all eternity, so also they created us to live in community with each other. Believers need the encouragement of fellow believers as we roam through a world still covered in darkness.
- For the *Lessons and Carols* service, we have provided lesson introductions for lectors. In that service, this reading slots in as the sixth (of seven) lessons. Luke 2 serves as the final lesson, read just before the final hymn. The preacher may try to preach a shorter sermon and not read the full text until the end. If he focuses primarily on the contrast between light and darkness, this is easily done. For example, without having read the lesson, the preacher could say, “The prophet Isaiah, multiple times in his book, talks about how dark the world is. Do you agree? Would you say the world is a dark place?” The preacher would then read snippets of the text to make the points outlined above. Finally, he would conclude his sermon the way all the other lesson introductions concluded. “A reading from the book of Isaiah, chapter 9.” This certainly is not necessary. The preacher could *start* with that: “A reading from the book of Isaiah, chapter 9,” then read the text, then launch into the sermon. Doing it the first way simply provides a symmetry with the rest of the lessons.

December 25 — CHRISTMAS DAY

THEME OF THE DAY: A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

This is the same theme as Christmas Eve. It fits the Gospel well, where St. John tells us, “A light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”

RECOMMENDED TEXT: JOHN 1:1-14

SERMON THEME: THE WORD BECAME FLESH

SERMON THOUGHTS

- It has been said there are dozens of sermons in every text. For John 1, there are hundreds. This could serve as the final exam for preachers. The challenge is to take a text that is exceedingly profound with multiple strains of thought and boil it down to one, coherent message that hits both head and heart.
- A possible introduction would be to share the fact that the four Gospels have symbols that the church attached to them. The Gospel of John's symbol is an eagle. Why? His words soar. They are so simple. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” There is not a single big, churchy sounding word in that sentence. It is simple and poetic, yet packed with meaning. On this Festival of the Nativity, let us explore the depth of these simple words.
- Last night (Christmas Eve) we learned that Jesus came into our dark world as a brilliant light. We also said that to be the Light of salvation, he needed to be both God and man: man, so that he was under Law; sinless God, that he might obey it perfectly; man, so that he might be killed; God, so that sacrifice is valuable enough to pay for the sin of the world. Yet the people in John's day did not understand this. They thought Jesus was a great man, but many stopped short of saying he was God. Hence John's words, “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.” Thus, John wants to explain exactly who Jesus is.
- John begins his Gospel with the same words that begin Genesis. “In the beginning...” Yet, in Genesis 1, we are taken back only to the beginning of time. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” John takes us back even further than Genesis, to a time when there was no earth. What was there? “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” There was One who was “with God”—he was not alone. There was more than one person. Yet this One also “was God.” Later, when John says, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us,” his point becomes clear. Jesus *is* one of the persons of the eternal Trinity.
- “The world was made through him.” There is a malady here. Everything that is made had an intended function provided by the maker. When an engineer designs a machine, that machine does not do anything nor everything. It does the *specific* thing for which it was designed. When an architect sketches out a building, he does not draw a generic box. He designs a building to fulfill a certain function he has in mind. Likewise, when God made us, it was for a specific purpose: to love God and give him glory, and to be a blessing to our fellow man. When we sin, we are simply living contrary to our design. We are failing to fulfill the purpose given to us by our maker. We were made in God's image so that we might be loving, thoughtful, and productive like him. Because we have not lived up to that purpose, we needed God to be made man.
- What a unique title—Λόγος. It can be translated as “word” or “reason” or “statement” or “communication.” Therefore, it does not mean “word” in the sense of vocabulary, e.g. “Justification” is a mighty big church word.” Rather, it refers to a message, an embodiment of an idea. The challenge for the preacher is to explain the significance of this title in a way that even a child can grasp. A possible approach is to expound on these two thoughts:
 - * On one hand, referring to Jesus as “the Word” while also talking about Creation calls to our mind how God created all things just with his voice. “Let there be light,” and there was light.” When we consider the vastness of Creation and embrace the reality that all God had to do to bring it into existence is speak, we realize we are dealing with a being we cannot possibly understand. Jesus is so far above us, so much beyond us, we cannot grasp the breath of his knowledge or the limitlessness of his power. The title “the Word” brings that to mind—the awesomeness of God's creative power.
 - * On the other hand, we *need* to understand this God, at least to some extent: what he wants and does not want of his Creation, how he feels about us and our sins. So, we needed him to reveal himself to us, that we might understand him. To *really* understand someone requires words. Imagine you are walking through a park. You see a young man in his 30s. Just by looking at him, you can make some deductions about him. He has no ring on his finger, so there's

a good chance he is single. He has a big beard and a plaid shirt, so you conclude he identifies as a hipster. He's eating a sandwich with lettuce, tomato, and a portobello mushroom in place of meat. So you assume he is a vegetarian. Just by looking at him, you can conclude much about him. But would you say you actually *know* him? No! To really know him would require a conversation... require *words*. Thus, when Jesus is called "the Word," the Spirit is telling us he is the way God lets us *really* get to know him. We can look at things like Creation and deduce some things about God: his power, wisdom, and creativity. Yet only in looking at Christ can we really see what is in God's heart. Only in looking at Christ can we see that God is "full of grace and truth." He does not wish to damn sinners, but save them.

- There is a converse truth in the incarnation. We needed God to take on flesh so that we might understand him. However, the fact that "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" also means that he understands us. That is one potential malady of this text—believing that God cannot possibly understand how hard it is to live as a weak human being in this dark world. Yes, he can. If you say, "God, do you know what it is like to face endless temptation," Jesus says, "I do." If you say, "God, do you know what it is like to be so scared you can barely function," Jesus reminds us how he sweat blood in Gethsemane and replies, "I can relate." If you say, "God, you can't know what it is like to have family and friends let you down again and again," Jesus points to his family and his disciples and says, "I think I understand." Even if you say, "Jesus, do you know what it is like to feel like God is against you... that God has abandoned you," Jesus can reply, "I understand that better than you, because my Father would never abandon you. But when I was on the cross paying for your sins, he did indeed abandon me."
- John picks up the thought from last night. How does one overcome the darkness of this world—sin and all its consequences? John says, "receive him." And he stresses this reception—the ability to "[believe] in his name"—is not something achieved by "human decision." It is "of God," a gift. Though the written Word, the Spirit ties us in faith to the incarnate Word. They are inseparable. To be in the Scripture is to be close to Christ. Apart from Scripture, one is apart from the Word.
- When we are told that Christ "made his dwelling among us," John uses a form of σκηνώω, a word that means to live in a tent. The other place that word is used is in Revelation, for example, chapter 21:3. "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.'" The first time God and man dwelt together was here on earth, when Jesus came to live with us. The second time, we are going to *his* home.
- A possible application to work into the sermon somewhere appropriate: the etymology of Christmas. The word is simply the combination of Old English words that mean Christ's Mass. We typically don't use the word "mass" in Lutheranism, but we understand it comes from the dismissal end of the Meal. "Ite, Missa est," that is, "Go, you are sent." In the Lutheran church, the pastor typically says something like, "Go in peace." The miracle of the incarnation touches us every time we are allowed to partake of the very body that was broken and blood that was shed for our forgiveness. This is something we want to do "as often as" it is offered. Holy Communion takes on this added significance on Christmas Day.
- A possible concluding thought. On Christmas, we celebrate the birth of a child. But the birth we celebrate is not just Jesus'. It is our own. John says that since, by grace, we have "received him," Christ gives us "the right to become children of God." The same Word which called the stars into being has made us God's children. The preacher might conclude by rereading select portions of the text, if not the whole thing.