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### Devotions for Advent 2023 Return & Rebuild The Temple of God An Advent & Christmastide Devotional

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# Return & Rebuild

# The Temple of God

## An Advent & Christmastide Devotional

*From the Students at*

*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

*& Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne*

## Greetings, Brothers and Sisters!

Greetings in the name of Christ! Across two seminaries, across several states, and across this Advent and Christmastide, we have gathered devotions from several students- both at CTSFW and CSL- to guide us in our consideration of this season. As new theologians and workers in the Church, we have a chance to encourage our brothers and sisters and stir each other up to look to Christ. So who is this Christ? He is the culmination of the entire Scriptures, and so we find Him everywhere.

The books of Ezra and Haggai are center stage in the Advent portion: God provides a way to return, to contribute to the presence of God among His people by building His Temple. Yes, Advent is a penitential season, a season of recognizing our vocations and how we have fallen short- but also how Christ comes among us nevertheless. We all have a part to play in rebuilding the body of Christ, the true Temple of God. Let not fear of our persecutors rule over us, because God will shame them and vindicate those who wait for Him!

In the joy of Christmastide, enjoy the season with a smattering of texts and devotions (as well as 3 sermons!) on the fulfillment of God's Temple, the incarnate God! What Zerubbabel sought to accomplish, Christ has fulfilled, and He will not let us go without a reminder of our duties to the Church. His body is worthy of every gift we can bring! The Church is now God's Temple, and even our individual bodies. How great a stewardship that we have, to build up the Body of the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord! Indeed, God's manifold word, both Law and Gospel, have much to say to us this season.

Thank you to all who contributed your wisdom and meditations for the communities' use- and may God bless your reading and prayer.

*- Avery Hjulberg, CSL & Patrick W. Randolph, CTSFW  
Advent 2023*

Reading: Ezra 1:1-11

Devotion: A loud voice resounds from the throne of the king: “Return to Jerusalem. Rebuild the house of the Lord, and adorn it with vessels of gold and silver.” The time of the exiles’ captivity had ended. By God’s merciful hand, His people had been rescued from bondage. Free at last, they could finally worship God in the place designated by His Law.

That temple no longer stands. The Law, fulfilled by Christ, marked Him as the true temple. We, who were once held captive to the bondage of sin, have been freed by Christ’s death to worship Him not on Mount Zion, but according to His Word in Spirit and in truth. And so, a new voice rings forth. It is Christ the king, calling: “Return to me. Believe in my forgiveness, and know that your bodies are My habitation. Adorn yourself not with gold or silver, but with the good works which I choose.”

May God so preserve and strengthen our faith in Christ unto life everlasting.

*He comes to judge the nations,  
A terror to His foes,  
A light of consolation  
And blessed hope to those  
Who Love the Lord’s appearing.  
O Glorious Sun, now come,  
Send forth Your beams so cheering  
And guide us safely home. (LSB 334:6)*

Reading: Ezra 3:1-7

Devotion: The Israelites feared “the peoples of the lands.” They wished to be set apart, carefully following what had been written in the law, long ago. Indeed, the Lord had promised Israel that it would be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” And in their zeal, the Israelites once declared, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.” But Israel spoke empty words. The Israelites could never muster enough holiness to set themselves apart for God. Even what they could offer—lumber and stone, freedom to worship—was given to them by outsiders. They thought God’s glory to be lighter than it truly is. They could not conceive of its actual weight and span. One altar made by hands cannot reach God in His fullness. So God turns the tables and reaches us. He gives Christ to us, as a baby in a manger, on the cross of Calvary, on Easter morning, and on countless altars in every time and place, the world over. Thanks be to God!

*Dear Father in Heaven, you welcomed the praise of the fearful exiles, and reminded them that they were still sojourners in the Promised Land. Accept our repentant praise, and bear our pleas for mercy, that we find a home in the city with eternal foundations. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord- Amen.*

Reading: Ezra 3:8-13

Devotion: Remember when you were a child, and you looked forward to that special day? Maybe it was Christmas or your birthday. You countdown the days and it gets closer and closer, your heart races, and your palms sweat. You can't sit still, so you pace around. You wait and wait, aaannd what if that day never came? Your heart races, your palms sweat, and you pace, not in excitement but now in anxiety. Waiting and watching.

God promised the Temple would be rebuilt, and the Israelites longed for that day. Generations grew old waiting and watching. Perhaps with anxiety, wondering if the day would come. Finally, that day came, just as He said.

Remember when you were a child, and you looked forward to that special day? This Advent season, we look forward to the return of Christ. Generations grow old waiting and watching. Not with anxiety for a day that will never come, but with excitement because Christ promised to return. That day will come; it will be joyous indeed.

*Redeemer, come and open wide My heart to Thee; here, Lord, abide!  
O enter with Thy grace divine; Thy face of mercy on me shine.  
Thy Holy Spirit guide us on Until our glorious goal is won.  
Eternal praise and fame  
We offer to Thy name. (LSB 340:5)*

Reading: Ezra 4:1-5

Devotion: The exiled Israelites had been building on the foundation of the new temple under the orders of Cyrus, king of Persia, and the promise of God . Yet they were deceived by their enemies' discouragement and received false counselors. The Samaritans called the work worthless and pointless (see Nehemiah 4:1-12).

Satan likewise attempts to distract us from God's Word with despair. He puts your weakness and faults in front of your eyes to prevent you from seeing God's promises.

Our Father does not permit these lies to go unchallenged. Just as He sent Haggai, so God sends pastors and fellow Christians to assure us that the Holy Spirit is with us (Haggai 2:3-5). He uses our feeble contrition and faith to receive Christ, the one born in weakness and crucified for our redemption. So do not be deceived by the devil's discouragement and do not receive the false counselor. God's grace is sufficient for you.

*O Lord, gird up the loins of our minds by Your divine power, and strengthen us in integrity in the inward man, that at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, we may be found worthy of the banquet of eternal life. Through Jesus Christ our Lord- Amen.*



Reading: Ezra 4:6-16

Devotion: The classic proverb reads: “Fear is a powerful motivator.” Such is true for the cosigners of this letter that we read today. These men lived close to the Judahites and observed them as they built up their temple. Blinded by hate, they wrote this letter to King Artaxerxes, spreading lies about the Jews by making passing references to tax evasion by the Judahites and a Jewish take-over of the whole province west of the Euphrates. These lies were unfounded, but the enemies of the Judahites stopped at nothing to destroy God’s people by perpetuating fear. Jesus himself too was falsely accused. The Pharisees claimed Jesus forbade giving tribute to Caesar, making himself a king. And we as the church are falsely accused of hate in the face of truth. Fear is a powerful motivator. But our God is more powerful. Just as He delivered His Son and raised Him from the dead, so too will He remain steadfast and faithful to us, His church.

*Ev’ry eye shall now behold Him  
Robed in glorious majesty;  
Those who set at naught and sold Him,  
Pierced and nailed Him to the tree,  
Deeply wailing, deeply wailing, deeply wailing,  
Shall their true Messiah see. (LSB 336:2)*

Reading: Ezra 4:17-24

Devotion: The people of God are once again vulnerable, persecuted by those who wish to see them remain weak. It is easy to read this passage from Ezra and leave with a feeling of hopelessness. The Jewish people's history of rebellion is a history of God preserving His chosen people. King Artaxerxes knows this and clings to his own power by stopping the rebuilding of the temple. While the physical work of rebuilding was stopped for a time, God did not cease to provide and preserve. It seems sometimes that the work of the Church has come to a halt. She does not hold the power she once did. But our God does not cease working. In times of weakness, His power is made manifest. His love is unending and His mercy unabating. As we reflect on the first coming of our Christ and wait for His second, may we abide in His ever-active love and mercy with patience and steadfastness.

*Creator of the stars of night,*

*Thy people's everlasting Light:*

*O Christ, Redeemer, save us all*

*And hear thy servants when they call. (LSB 351:1)*

Reading: Haggai 1:1-11

Devotion: While Haggai's message is specifically to the Governor of Judah and the High Priest regarding the people's failure to rebuild the temple, this sounds a lot like what we are doing today. Instead of being thankful for what God has given us and preparing to celebrate the birth of His Son for our salvation, we busy ourselves working to get more. We focus on the vain endeavor of worrying about what gifts we want for ourselves and others, and what we are going to eat, drink, and wear. None of this is fulfilling, we always end up wanting more. Yet while Haggai's message is full of law, the Gospel is just under the surface. Even though God caused drought on the people back then, we know that our God brings us rain and provides all we need. And unlike the Jews during that time, who were to build an earthly temple (which would be destroyed again), God has given us His eternal temple in His Son Jesus Christ.

*Startled at the solemn warning*

*Let the earthbound soul arise.*

*Christ, its sun, all sloth dispelling,*

*Shines upon the eastern skies. (LSB 345:2)*

Reading: Haggai 1:12-15

Devotion: Once again, we see that work of God which is so perplexing to us; that our perfect God accomplishes his purposes through the feeble hearts and blundering hands of sinners. The people of Israel had placed their hopes and their fears in things other than the LORD, their one true God. But God reaches past these selfish desires into the hearts of sinners and stirs them up to walk with him again. They hear the Word of the LORD. They fear him, they obey his voice, and they go forth to do his work... But they do not go alone. The LORD makes a powerful promise to them: "I am with you." As the people of God are sent to do his work, they are never alone, for he is with them. Let us prepare our hearts and our hands accordingly, while we await the fulfillment of God's presence in Christ, the one whom we joy to call "Immanuel" – "God with us!"

*Not by human flesh and blood,*

*By the Spirit of our God,*

*Was the word of God made flesh-*

*Woman's offspring, pure and fresh! (LSB 332:2)*

Reading: Haggai 2:1-5

Devotion: This Advent, we might ask ourselves a similar question to the one the LORD asked the exiles here: “How do you see this Advent and Christmas season? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?” Loved ones who are no longer with us, personal conflicts, trouble in society, these things can all make us long for Christmases past. But Ecclesiastes 7:10 reminds us that nostalgia can be deceptive. God encourages the exiles and us never to despair for two reasons: God remains faithful to his covenant promises, and his Holy Spirit remains in our midst. Impressive temples and holiday nostalgia are nice, but God’s promise of salvation and the work of his Spirit are what truly matter. As long as we have those, we’ll be alright. So fear not. Be strong. Christ has not abandoned you, nor will He ever. Your work in Him, however difficult, is never in vain.

*Dearest Father, You bring to nothing everything that appears of worth, so that we might look for fruitfulness in You alone. Thank You for being with us during this season. Sanctify our hearts through the Word, that we might worship you in Spirit and in Truth- Amen.*

Reading: Haggai 2:6-9

Devotion: Haggai promises peace to God's people delivered from exile, but that peace does not come in the way they expect. The glory of the Lord never comes into the temple built after the exile, but it does come in the promised Messiah, Jesus. The Lord shook the nations with Roman rule and a census and brought Jesus' virgin mother, Mary, and his guardian, Joseph, to Bethlehem where Micah prophesied His birth. The house filled with glory is not a temple built with hands, but the temple is the Church, God's people. The Lord's glory with which they are filled is not silver and gold, but rather they are filled with the gifts of salvation and eternal life won for us on the cross by the "treasure of nations" Himself and delivered by Him in His preached Word and Holy Sacraments. The peace, the unity of this world under God's will, is glimpsed in these gifts, but will be completed on the Last Day when Christ returns in His ultimate glory.

*The humble heart and lowly*

*God raises up on high;*

*Beneath His feet in terror*

*The haughty soul shall lie.*

*The heart sincere and right*

*The heeds God's invitation*

*And makes true preparation-*

*It is the Lord's delight! (LSB 354:3)*

Reading: Haggai 2:10-14

Devotion: It is tradition at summer camp when your cabin group has an activity in the mudpit to find and hug a “clean” staff member, thereby making them unclean. Even the process of cleaning up after the mudpit is a messy affair, no matter how thoroughly you hose off, you are carrying mud around until you get into the shower. Even the shower requires a good cleaning after you’ve cleaned away the mud. In this passage the prophet Haggai is speaking to the priests of Israel about cleanliness. Like that mudpit mud the Israelite is fundamentally unclean. They had turned away from God and been conquered and taken captive by Babylon and Assyria. Israel is waiting for the Savior who can make them truly clean. So we too, in this Advent season look forward to Jesus Christ, who made us clean in our baptism with water and the word, and who will make all things right in the life of the world to come.

*Lord Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest: You see the filth of our souls, and that all we touch becomes unclean. Cleanse us by Your Spirit during this season, so that we may rejoice in the fellowship of the royal priesthood at your joyful birth among us- Amen.*

Reading: Haggai 2:15-19

Devotion: Haggai writes to a people that God has brought out of exile to new freedom. The LORD has taken them from the devastation and desolation of Babylon to their own land and has reestablished them as His people. The LORD has called His people to rejoice in His redemption and gracious mercy, but they are apathetic. The temple remains unbuilt and God's name remains forgotten among His people. God regathers His people that they may call on Him, receive His gifts, and find new life in Him, and they simply do not care. Because of this, God gives them up to famine, suffering, hunger, and blight that He may repent them, and then He delivers the promise, "from this day on I will bless you." This is the same promise Christ gives in baptism. In a world held captive by sin, death, and Satan, we have the certain comfort that Christ is risen and keeps His church and people until the day He makes all things new.

*O Come, O Come, Immanuel*

*And ransom captive Israel*

*That mourns in lonely exile here*

*Until the Son of God appear.*

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel*

*Shall come to thee, O Israel! (LSB 357:1)*



Reading: Haggai 2:20-23

Devotion: In Haggai 2:23, God says that he will make Zerubbabel His signet ring. A signet ring is an instrument used to seal impressions of the King's seal on official letters. If someone is a signet ring, then they are a passive tool with no authority or value outside of their master. While reading this passage I was reminded about the hymn Built on the Rock LSB 645. The third stanza calls us "God's house of living stones" and tells us that we are "built for His own habitation." What is our response to our God who saves us and builds us up? The hymn says that we "we come with thanks to praise His name" because "God grants His people true blessing" (LSB 645). Everyday let us sing His praise for He has bought us with "not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious and innocent blood" (Small Catechism). Our response to God's saving grace should be to make ourselves an instrument for His will.

*The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup;  
you hold my lot.*

*The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;*

*Indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.*

*Glory be to the Father...*

*Psalm 16:5-6*

Reading: Ezra 5:1-5

Devotion: The Word of God is an amazing thing. There are only two little chapters in Haggai's prophecy. The Word of God is effective, even from the mouth of a lowly prophet in a lowly land. They are direct, and potent, like living yeast into inert dough. Zerubbabel arises. It soon spreads to the whole lump of the Exiles. All other noise is drowned out this time. This persecution is nothing compared to the healthy heat of God's living Word. God's eye is upon them, baking that dough into a bold loaf of thanksgiving to God, a bread of God's own presence. The elders did not shrink from their task.

Who are you, to build up the Temple of God? You are God's chosen one, put in this place for this purpose, and God is already with you. Arise, for the sake of the Temple, and build! The government will take care of itself, because God has his eye on what you are building.

*Lay on the sick Thy healing hand*

*And make the fallen strong to stand;*

*Show us the glory of Thy face*

*Til beauty springs in ev'ry place. (LSB 344:5)*

Reading: Ezra 5:6-17

Devotion: The wonderful letter of Tattenai to King Darius reveals to us a historical truth behind the decree of King Cyrus the Great, on behalf of God, to rebuild the Temple. The appeal to search the king's treasure house to find the king's decree parallels the Church's readiness to search the Scriptures. Appealing to the Scriptures is how Jesus and His apostles demonstrated His genuine claim to be the Christ, the incarnate Son of God. Interestingly, the appeal to the Scriptures was also one of the ways Jesus' enemies tried to malign Him. In both cases, the reliability and authority of what has been written, accepted, and handed down as Holy Scripture is unquestioned. We then, as Christians, are now the very Temple in which God has chosen to dwell.

*My hosannas and my palms*

*Graciously receive, I pray Thee;*

*Evermore, as best I can,*

*Savior, I will homage pay Thee,*

*And in faith I will embrace,*

*Lord, Thy merit through Thy grace. (LSB 350:3)*

Reading: Ezra 6:1-12

Devotion: Tattenai, appearing in Jerusalem like an eager snitch and inquiring about the temple project's legal status, confronts the Judean captives who are rebuilding the temple in a way that sounds remarkably like the Chief Priests confronting Jesus about 70 weeks of years later. The Judean captives replied that they serve the God of heaven and earth and that late King Cyrus had decreed for this work to be completed. The Judean captives also serve King Darius it turns out. A record of Cyrus' previous decree was located in Ecbatana. Darius has harsh and passionate words for his governor Tattenai - Keep away! And the construction and sacrifice will be provided for from the royal revenue the governor is responsible for. Death by being lifted and fixed upon a beam is the sentence for anyone modifying Darius' decree. Rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem is an epic work that Jesus is orchestrating in the time of Ezra. Jesus will come to put an end to sin and atone for iniquity.

*O Almighty God, you hear the vain plots of men, and bring them to nothing. As you raised up Cyrus for the sake of the returning exiles, and sustained Darius for the sake of their peace, give us good government, favorable to Your Church, that we may spread Your reign of forgiveness in Your Son, Jesus Christ, through Whom we pray- Amen.*

Reading: Ezra 6:13-22

Devotion: By the time the second temple was finished, it had been roughly 70 years since the center of Israel's worship had been destroyed. They were still recovering from the exile. It was a dreary time for them. But the completion of the temple marked a glimmer of hope – God would dwell with his people again!

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Israel was once again in a dreary place. It had been over 400 years since God had spoken to them. They were under the authority of the Roman Empire. But Jesus' birth, whether they knew it or not, was a ray of hope – God was dwelling with his people!

During Advent, during this cold and dreary time of year, we don't just remember the incarnation, but we look to the return of Jesus. Our world is dreadfully dreary. That is exceptionally clear. But Advent reminds us that we have a bright and certain hope – God will restore his creation, make his people new, and dwell with his people forevermore!

*O Holy Spirit, You hovered over creation at the beginning and breathed into Adam the breath of life. Enter us, we pray, that the Kingdom of Christ may renew our hearts in faith, our minds in truth, and our bodies in loving service- through Jesus Christ, our Lord- Amen.*

Reading: Ezra 7:1-10

Devotion: The people of Israel have just returned from their exile in Babylon, and they need someone to teach them the Law of the Lord, so God sends Ezra to teach His people the Law of Moses, which has been handed down from generation to generation. God chose Ezra because he had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord. Not only did Ezra want to study the Law of the Lord, but he wanted to do it, and to teach the statutes and just decrees of God in Israel. We, like the Israelites, need someone to teach us the Word of God. We are no longer under the Law of Moses, instead, we need to be taught the Gospel of Christ, who came and fulfilled the Law perfectly. God chooses men to study the Word of God, and to reflect the Gospel, just as Christ did. Therefore, those who take up this task have set their hearts to study the Word of God.

*Almighty God, grant our souls to enjoy this desire, to be enkindled by Your Spirit, that being filled as lamps by the Divine gift, we may at His coming shine like blazing lights before the presence of Your Son, Jesus Christ, through Whom we pray- Amen.*

Reading: Ezra 7:11-28

Devotion: As we approach Christmas, we prepare all kinds of things – events, decorations, the perfect gifts. But in the flurry of decorating a beautiful tree and the bustle of holiday sales, do we stop to consider what gifts we can bring to God as we anticipate celebrating the wonder of the incarnation?

Many years before Jesus' birth, God did a wondrous thing in restoring the Israelite remnant to Jerusalem and enabling them to rebuild His temple – the place of His presence. Through Ezra and King Artaxerxes, God called His people to bring offerings to the temple. God Himself provided the gold and silver they would need. This Advent, as we look forward to the celebration of God bringing His presence to us through Jesus, we should ponder the gifts God has given to us. How can we use these gifts as offerings to the Lord? May God bless us as we consider all He has given us and as we offer Him the sacrifice of our thanksgiving.

*Great are the works of the Lord,*

*studied by all who delight in them.*

*Full of splendor and majesty is his work,*

*and his righteousness endures forever.*

*He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered;*

*the Lord is gracious and merciful.*

*He provides food for those who fear him;*

*he remembers his covenant forever. Glory be to the Father...*

*Psalm 111:2-5*

Reading: Ezra 8:21-36

Devotion: In these verses, Ezra causes us to pause and ponder the very real ways which God's hand sustains his people each and every day. In verse 31, Ezra gave thanks to God for his deliverance from enemies and ambushes on the way. He correctly realized this as a gift from God.

Did you drive to work or school safely? Did you have enough food to eat today? Did you wake up this morning? Life and safety are not guarantees, even in today's world, and we give thanks to God for his sustenance through every hour. Yet even through hard times, we give thanks to God for his sustenance in The Way. God promises to show grace and mercy to strengthen the faith of his beloved children. We continue along this Way until he brings us at last to that beautiful city where danger and darkness shall be no more.

*At whose dread name, majestic now,  
All knees must bend, all hearts must bow;  
All things celestial Thee shall own,  
And things terrestrial, Lord alone.  
(LSB 351:4)*



Reading: Zechariah 9:1-10

Devotion: God chose the world's foolish, weak, and despised things to shame the wise and strong. When He chose Israel as His holy nation through whom Christ would come, it was not because they were more in number or more righteous than the other nations, but rather they were the lowliest of them all. How lowly they were in comparison to the great peoples of Tyre and Gaza, Ashkelon and Ashdod. Yet the Lord promised to smite them. Tyre stripped of her lavish possessions of silver and gold, devoured by fire. Gaza's king perishes and the people are dispersed. Ashkelon becomes a ghost town. Ashdod loses its ethnic make up, no longer being a people, but a mixed people. God reproaches and destroys the exalted. Similarly, the lowly Christ, came into Jerusalem humble and mounted on a donkey to die a shameful death. But from his death, God smites the mighty powers of sin, death, and Satan, defeating them so that you might overcome them and enjoy the heavenly promised land.

*Redeemer, come and open wide  
My heart to Thee; here, Lord, abide!  
O enter with Thy grace divine;  
Thy face of mercy on me shine.  
Thy Holy Spirit guide us on  
Until our glorious goal is won.  
Eternal praise and fame  
We offer to Thy name. (LSB 340:5)*

Reading: Zechariah 14:1-11

Devotion: Light comes and goes as the days change. Cold and frost do the same with the seasons and geography. It's all impermanent, yet it always comes back. God says through his prophet Zechariah that there will be a day these impermanent things will be no more: a unique day. One day, the cycle of coming and going, the cycle of impermanence, will be gone, including our cycle of sinning and repenting and repeating. With all impermanence gone, all that will be left is the permanent: The great I AM, and His kingdom. This day will be the Day of the Lord. Until that day comes, it's important that we exercise the gift that we have been given that will carry on from this impermanent life to the permanent one to come: the Love of God that we are called to share with and have for one another. This love will never end.

*Heavenly Judge, Lord Jesus Christ: You have known the deepest pain of mankind, Your cross and passion. Come speedily to save us, whom You have redeemed by Your blood, and give us the Sabbath rest of Your abiding presence- Amen.*

Reading: Luke 2:1-8

Devotion: You, reader, are hopefully at home right now. Home is after all where we belong, and what better place is there to remember all our blessings than where we're surrounded by friends and family. We should thank God for all His generosity. And in the reading today, we see another example of God's abundant love. We've heard how the unborn Jesus was summoned by God to Bethlehem, but found no room at the inn. No one came to offer Him or His family a spare room or couch to crash on. But they were left out in the cold and dark. And it didn't have to be that way. Someone else could have been left out. Shouldn't they be outside and Jesus inside instead? It's not fair! Yet we were also summoned, not to Bethlehem, but to a cross. But this time, it was us who found no room. It's still not fair, but Jesus took our place once again.

*Yea, amen, let all adore Thee,  
High on Thine eternal throne;  
Savior, take the pow'r and glory,  
Claim the kingdom as Thine own.  
Alleluia, Alleluia, alleluia!  
Thou shalt reign and Thou alone! (LSB 336:4)*

Reading: Revelation 21:15-27

Devotion: The gentle light of the lamp you grip in your hands provides some comfort as you take yet another heavy step forward through the darkness. The lamp you were given provides light unto the path ahead of you, but the darkness which surrounds you seems almost crushing. Occasionally you see a little glimmer of hope, a glint of glittering gold or sparkling sapphire, but you cannot dwell on it for long. You must continue forward in your exhausting journey into the maw of the all-consuming darkness before you. Yet as you pass through the dark gloomy gape, you begin to notice more of those hopeful glimmers that you saw along the journey which become increasingly vibrant with each quickening step. The gentle light of the lamp you hold tightly grows brighter and brighter, illuminating more of your glorious surroundings. You look down and see that you are no longer clasping a lamp, but a warm, nail-scarred hand who leads you down the streets of the shining city. To Him be the glory forever and ever!

*We thank and praise You, Lord Jesus Christ, on this anniversary of Your birth into our human flesh. We adore the mystery of the Incarnation, and will sing endlessly of the enfleshed God. Teach us hereby to honor the common flesh of mankind as one with the divine, and strengthen our faith by Your Holy Spirit, so that we may make known Your love on this glorious day- Amen.*

St. Stephen's Day- A Sermon from Cody MacMillin (Sem 4)

Reading: Matthew 23:34-49

**It is fitting that the day which follows the celebration of Jesus' coming should be one that celebrates his first martyr.** This is no accident, nor is the idea of martyrdom any more powerful than during the Christmas season. For whenever Jesus comes, death soon follows. When Christ came to be born in Bethlehem, Herod executed all the other infants of the city. When Christ came in the way prepared by John the Baptist, the prophet's head soon arrived on a silver platter. When Jesus came to heal a man possessed by demons, a mass of pigs soon threw itself off the side of a cliff. What do we make of this strange trail of death following Jesus? Could it be, as the Pharisees said, that Jesus truly serves the prince of demons? Certainly not. To the contrary, the reason why death follows Jesus is because hell cannot stand his presence. When the Son of God comes to earth, hell rebels in beastly and ferocious ways. It rises to meet him at every turn, mocking him, taunting him, even tempting him to betray his Father's mission.

Even so, and for all the times that hell rises against Jesus, the Son of God always wins. This is illustrated clearly in the life and ministry of St. Stephen, for whom we give thanks and remembrance this day. Stephen was a man tasked suddenly with facing the forces of hell. As he was doing great signs and wonders, witnessing to the resurrected Christ, some wicked men, agents of hell, wrongly accused him of blasphemy. In turn, Stephen rightly accused hell's agents of slaying Jesus as God's prophet and king. Enraged by this truth, the agents of hell took up stones and killed Stephen, but not before the heavens

opened to receive him in a vision of God's glory. For all the times that hell rises against Him, the Son of God always wins.

In the 21st century, we are not Stephen, but we remember him and celebrate his faith. The boldness of his proclamation has no parallel in our modern world, saturated with religious freedom. Hell does rise to meet us the way that it did the first century Church. Even so, our Confessions teach us that when Christ comes to us, death must still follow. We are drowned in the waters of Holy Baptism, mortifying our Old Adam and crucifying our sinful flesh. Our Christian life is a daily warfare against our own hell, against our own wickedness and pride which put Jesus on the Cross. We do not escape death when Jesus comes. We must first embrace it in order to be embraced by the new life He offers. We must consider ourselves, as the apostle says, both, "dead to sin and alive to God." It is never one without the other.

## St. John's Day- A Sermon from Harvey Peters (Sem 2)

Reading: Revelation 1:1-6

**St. John, apostle and evangelist, was a martyr for His Lord Jesus Christ, not in deed but in will.** John was always preoccupied with the idea of martyrdom, it seems. At the beginning of his testimony concerning Christ, he spoke of a martyr, sent from God, also named John. His first letter to the Church began with his witness concerning the Word of Life, which he heard, saw, looked upon, and handled. And now, before he relates the revelation given to him by God, he writes of the faithful martyr, who is none other than Jesus Christ Himself.

The Church has normally reserved the title of martyr for those who came after Jesus, taking up their crosses, following in His train. Yet the Lord Himself told Pilate, "To this end I was born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth" (John 18:37). Jesus lived His entire life as a martyr, a witness, to His Father's love for the world, for "in this was manifested the love of God toward us, that God send His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him" (1 John 4:9). The love of God was manifested in the very flesh of Jesus itself and He to this love in no other manner than in His precious suffering and death. For in this is love, that God "sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

Jesus was the first, the faithful martyr, but John tells us that He is also "the firstborn of the dead, the prince of the kings of the earth," the one "who loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood." John received the content of this testimony not in his heavenly vision,

but as he walked beside His Lord, when he saw with his own eyes the Lamb of God upon the cross, the empty sepulcher, Jesus ascending upon high to reign. What John had heard and seen drove him to the temple with Peter after Pentecost to preach about Jesus, the risen Son of God, and sustained them as the Jews detained them and forbade them even to speak in the name of Jesus. To this, John and Peter replied, “we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.”

Dear Christians, you have heard the same Jesus speak to you in His Word, you have seen and looked upon His risen body, which is the Church. You are called now to go forth as a martyr, a witness, perhaps in deed, but certainly in will. Your life and death as a Christian are not to take the shape of St. Stephen’s, nor of St. John’s, but of the true and faithful martyr, Jesus Christ. Thus He has fitted you to be kings and priests unto God our Father, witnesses to His love for mankind. To Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever.



## Holy Innocent's Day- A Sermon from Aaron Coggins (Sem 4)

Reading: Psalm 71

**Slogans make bad prayers, even if the two have much in common.** Slogans are just petitions that ask of you what you might ask of God. A slogan might ask you for your sympathy, for your attention, for you to change your mind, or even for your money. But when it comes down to it, no slogan makes a fitting prayer.

Let's take as an example the slogan that goes, "prolife for the whole life." It sounds suspiciously like a fitting abbreviation of Psalm 71, and one that would be particularly appropriate for our feast today. "You are he who took me from my mother's womb ... so even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me." O God, be prolife for my whole life.

The slogan sounds like an easy way to pray, it sounds like a slimmed-down summary of the seventy-first Psalm. What could be wrong with that?

But slogans do make bad prayers, and if "prolife for the whole life" were an exception to that rule, if it were a slogan good enough to pray, then today wouldn't be a feast day; it would have to be a fast.

The Feast of the Holy Innocents would have to be a day for sackcloth and for ashes, for lamentation and for weeping. If "prolife for the whole life" were good enough to pray, if it captured the whole breadth of the living God's love for us, then all those baby boys two years old and under would be just so many prayers unanswered, and just so many grave-bound bodies from conception to untimely death.

Slogans make bad prayers, because what they're asking for is never quite big enough. "Prolife for the whole life," but what about when we get to the end of that whole life, and death belies the slogan? If all we can ask of God is only to be prolife for the whole life, we are, as Paul has said, of all people most to be pitied, for our hope has been in this life only, and the bodies of these baby Bethlehemites would always lay in their little graves.

We need bigger prayers than slogans can give to us, and thanks be to God that He's given them. That's what the fine-print, full-out, word-for-word version of Psalm 71 is supposed to be for us. Because God's prayer for us in Psalm 71 doesn't leave out the missing part.

"You who have made me see many troubles and calamities" – the awfulness of every evil Herod, of war, and bloodshed, and sickness, and death – you "will revive me again. From the depths of the earth, you will bring me up again." And not just me, but all your loved ones, whom death has cradled all too soon. That's no slogan, but it is a good prayer.

Reading: Psalm 84

Devotion: The tents of wickedness are everywhere in this world, waiting at every turn. Their allure is so tempting, as man's corrupted heart so ignorantly marches him down the highways to hell, so consumed with the world he gives no thought to the Kingdom of Heaven and sees no other road. So overcome with sin, this road is the only one man could ever know. But a greater tent reigns. Just days ago, we celebrated the Lord's coming forth from the Virgin's Womb as the Incarnate Gospel, the very dwelling of God with man, the Tabernacle of Righteousness.

The same Lord forever tabernacles with you as your Shield from those tents of wickedness. The Spirit works through Word and Sacrament to turn your heart instead towards the highways to Zion where the Father sees only that Shield Who comes to you covering all your sin.

*O come, Thou Key of David, come,  
And open wide our heavenly home;  
Make safe the way that leads on high,  
And close the path to misery. (LSB 357:4)*

Reading: Matthew 21:12-17

Devotion: The temple of God is a place of grace, mercy, peace, and prayer for all. How often do we come to worship though looking to get something out of it for ourselves? Jesus righteously casts these distractions and evils from the temple and does so this day within each of us. He calls us all to repentance and in His forgiving hand, opens our eyes to true worship and faith, restoring us to a right relationship with Him. Through His work on the cross, Jesus clears out the sins of the repentant and makes a place for us in the temple of His body, which is the Church everlasting. He defends this body against all evils until the day He comes again in final victory. He will preserve and keep us in faith until that day, and upon these promises, we await the eternal feast of our triumphant King Jesus.

*Lord Jesus, You will not allow Your holy Name to be mocked, or your gracious salvation to be sold at steep price. Sweep out the old leaven from our souls and drive away all temptations, that we offer praise with spotless faith and confess the truth with integrity, through Your holy name- Amen.*

Reading: Mark 13:1-2,9-11

Devotion: We in the church often look at the events of the world and beg Christ to return and bring His kingdom. Why? Because we, like the disciples and the 1st century Jews, want a Messiah that will establish his kingdom on this world. That, or we take a gnostic approach and want the material world to be destroyed. We do not discern this passage correctly when we wish for the latter things to happen. It would be more proper to remember that the events of this world are but signs of the coming end. The events of this world should instead embolden us to go out and proclaim the name of Christ, and to expect persecution. While we eagerly wait for Christ we should eagerly go out into the world and proclaim his name to all that they may believe. Amen.

*Dear God, Heavenly Father, since we are Temples of Your Holy Spirit, save us from vain idolatry of earthy institutions. By Your Word and Sacraments, bring salvation to the ends of the earth. In the hour when confession is required of us, let the Words come not from us, but from Christ our Lord, through Whom we pray- Amen.*

Reading: John 18:33-37

Devotion: In this passage of John's passion account, we see Jesus personally examined by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. In this narrative we see one central theme: Jesus is the heavenly king who comes to us. The Jewish leaders are furious over Jesus' claims to be God, for they cannot believe that the promises of God are manifest in Him. In their attempt to convince the pagan governor to grant them Jesus' execution, they claim that Jesus has made Himself to be a threat to Roman governance. How bemused Pilate must have been; how pathetic this Jew must have seemed in comparison to the Roman Empire. Yet, Jesus was indeed a king. He was a king who chose to leave His heavenly soldiers behind. He was a king unlike any other, a king who refused to send a messenger and who visited his subjects personally. He was an unexpected king, a king who came to bear witness to the truth—and to die for it.

*The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed,  
a stronghold in times of trouble.*

*And those who know your name put their trust in you,  
for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you.*

*Glory be to the Father...*

*Psalm 9:9-10*

Reading: Acts 4:5-12

Devotion: When the people of God gather, the enemies of God also gather in opposition. Confounded and annoyed by the Gospel message, the wicked wage war against it— they challenge, imprison, and persecute the faithful. With such great stakes, why would the faithful gather at all? What gives Peter and John such confidence, especially in the face of the power and authority of Annas, Caiaphas, and the high-priestly family? What gives confidence to those people of God who remain unnamed? Such confidence cannot be granted by worldly authority or reason, but only by the Holy Spirit. Such confidence stems from faith founded in Jesus Christ. The confidence of the Church is founded in the knowledge that salvation comes to her through Christ's death on a cross and bodily resurrection. The Church gathers around the very body and blood of Christ, her cornerstone. When God's people gather, they gather in the confidence that His enemies will never prevail over the Gospel.

*All nations surrounded me;*

*in the name of the Lord I cut them off!*

*They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side;*

*in the name of the Lord I cut them off!*

*They surrounded me like bees;*

*they went out like a fire among thorns;*

*in the name of the Lord I cut them off!*

*Glory be to the Father...*

*Psalm 118:10-12*

Reading: 2 Corinthians 6:14-18

Devotion: Darkness and light don't mix. You can't have them both at the same time. You either have darkness, which is the absence of light, or you have light that penetrates and illuminates that darkness. In the exact same way, righteousness and lawlessness are opposites. Christ and Belial, belief and unbelief, they are all contradictory. Ever since Adam and Eve were removed from Eden and put into a world of darkness, idols, unbelief, and sin, the question has been, "Who will let us back into the light of Eden?" Christmastide answers that question with one word: Jesus. Jesus has made his dwelling among us. Jesus has walked among us. Jesus is our God, and we are his people. The darkness has not overcome the light. In our baptism he has set us apart from sin and darkness, and has brought us into his own light. This is the assurance that we have, that Jesus has come to save his people, to save us.

*Heavenly Father, You have made us Your sons and daughters through the work of Your Son, Jesus Christ. He has taken away our sins and handed over to us His own flesh and blood, His own righteousness. By Your Holy Inspiration, let us never forget the cost of our salvation, and the high calling that comes with it. Through Christ our Lord- Amen.*



Reading: 1 Peter 2:1-6

Devotion: What's necessary to build a strong tower? Bricks and mortar may be essential building blocks, but without a sturdy foundation, the tower won't hold up for long, if at all. The same is true of the Church. With all our cracks and flaws, we bricks are worthless without a cornerstone. Thankfully, our Father laid out the blueprint for His Church, and the foundation He builds us on is the best of the best – His Son Jesus! There's no stronger foundation that He could have built us on. As for our cracks and flaws? He fills and refines them, remaking our contorted forms to be fully perfected in Him. We still face the effects of our own sinfulness and that of the world around us, but thanks be to God that He has laid the groundwork. The world around us may be in disarray, yet we need not fret. He keeps His Church grounded in Him. Our faith is sure because it is built upon Him – the Rock of our salvation.

*For the Lord has chosen Zion;*

*he has desired it for his dwelling place:*

*“This is my resting place forever;*

*here I will dwell, for I have desired it.*

*I will abundantly bless her provisions;*

*I will satisfy her poor with bread.*

*Her priests I will clothe with salvation,*

*and her saints will shout for joy...”*

*Glory be to the Father...*

*Psalm 132:13-16*

Reading: 1 Peter 2:7-12

Devotion: I am a chosen exile.

There is nothing to compare with the peace of home – where I breathe a sigh of relief because I belong.

Now, exile – that is darkness, tension, unknown. Here, I ask myself, “Who am I?” I crave peace and fulfillment, but find only emptiness. My identity feels slippery and unstable.

And I am an exile not only in my land, but in this world. What is more, this world seeks to form my identity – to stamp its grisly vice on my soul so that I might belong to it forever.

But, Satan, be gone – with your temptation and lie! For my soul has found its rest in another place yet more permanent and unchanging than the physical ground I stand upon this day. My God and Father has called my soul forth from this homeland of sin and death, and He calls me a chosen, a holy nation. I will live as a citizen of this Eternal Kingdom.

A chosen exile I shall be.

*Father of Light, Giver of all good gifts, fill me with Your light and give me a home with You. Put the blessed death of Your Son always before my eyes, and convict me that nothing more is required to grant me all Your blessings. Send Your Holy Spirit, that I may abound in patience until the day of Your blessed appearing- Amen.*

Reading: Psalm 138

Devotion: One of Herod the Great's most audacious delusions of personal grandeur was the Herodion, a fortress-palace built between 23-20 BC. This complex, which he literally moved mountains to build, was intended to attract and entertain royalty from afar. It happened to overlook the little town of Bethlehem, where Jesus entered the world in the humblest of circumstances. The King of all Kings did not need a fortress-palace to attract attention. Magi from the far east traveled a great distance to honor the true King of the Jews. A king who regards the lowly. A king who preserves life and protects us against enemies who seek to threaten our lives. Today, when visitors travel to tour the Herodion, only a shell of it remains, but the Kingdom of God endures forever. "All the kings of the earth shall one day give you thanks, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth."

*Lord Jesus Christ, thank You for keeping me and mine through this Advent and Christmas season. I love the habitation of Your house, and the place where Your glory dwells! Your presence is not confined to a stable in Bethlehem, and yet You have not departed from the human nature You have assumed. Build up Your body, the Church! Build us up to that full stature of maturity that You have in Yourself, so that we may share in Your glory, and bring honor to Your name- Amen.*