



Hark, the Glad Sound!

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2018

Hark, the Glad Sound! (ELW 239)

Hark, the glad sound! The Savior comes,
the Savior promised long;
let ev'ry heart prepare a throne
and ev'ry voice a song.

He comes the pris'ners to release,
in Satan's bondage held.
The gates of brass before him burst,
the iron fetters yield.

He comes the broken heart to bind,
the bleeding soul to cure,
and with the treasures of his grace
to enrich the humble poor.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
your welcome shall proclaim,
and heav'n's eternal arches ring
with your beloved name.

Philip Doddridge, 1702–51

Sunday, December 2

(ELW 239, verse 1)

We announce the coming of the Messiah with this hymn. The season of Advent has begun. We prepare ourselves for the Savior's birth in our lives. As we do so, we find ourselves—like the characters in the 1985 movie "Back to the Future"—in a time warp. God's promises from the *past* now become a *future* that redefines our present.

Even now, we can claim by faith the promises of mercy and justice that the prophets of old declared: Valleys will be filled. Mountains and hills will be brought low. What is crooked within and around us will be made straight, and rough edges will be smoothed.

Yes, even now, we can claim God's promise of a new future amid whatever we are facing. Even now, our hearts can become a throne—a place or a dwelling—where the Messiah abides. Even now, our voice can start singing a new song.

O God, we claim by faith your promise of the Messiah, our Savior. Create in us a new heart and give us a new song amid everything that is happening in our lives. Amen.

Monday, December 3

Malachi 3:1–4

"Where is the God of justice?" (Malachi 2:17). Will God ever vindicate truth, goodness, and justice in this world? Why do so many who do evil claim that God is blessing them?

The messenger of the covenant tells us that the Lord bears witness against all who manipulate spiritual power. The Lord exposes our disloyalty, our lies, and our injustice toward one another. The Lord cannot tolerate employers who pay their workers unfairly. The Lord brings judgment against communities that "thrust aside" aliens and ignore the plight of single parents and orphans (Malachi 3:5).

These words are like refining fire and cleansing soap. We cannot escape their purifying work. Yet as the Lord purifies and refines us, we become priests of God and temples of the Holy Spirit. And as the Lord purifies and refines us, truth, goodness, and justice are vindicated in this world. But this only happens *in and through us*.

Dear Lord, refine and purify us. Make our bodies temples of your Holy Spirit so that our lives can be places where truth, justice, and goodness happen—for the sake of our families and friends, our congregations, our workplaces, and our nation. Amen.

Tuesday, December 4

Luke 1:68–79

Zechariah's blessing gives us a short synopsis of what we celebrate during Advent. At the heart of our celebration is the God of Israel, a God who cares for and redeems us by raising up a Savior from the line of David.

As the prophets promised, this God shows mercy by saving us from all the destructive patterns that damage and distort our lives. And this God empowers us to inhabit our lives with a holiness and a righteousness that buttress against further dysfunction.

As this happens, we too, like John the Baptist, become God's prophets. We announce and prepare the way for the Lord's coming. We give people knowledge of salvation: the forgiveness of sins that upends our destructive patterns. As God's mercy permeates the spaces of our lives, a new dawn breaks in, within, and around us. Light shines. Our destructive patterns are exposed and healed. What replaces them are practices that lead to peace.

Dear God, help us to use this Advent season as a way to test and exercise your promises in Jesus. Show us your mercy and save us from our destructive patterns so that we can serve you with holiness and righteousness throughout the day. Amen.

Wednesday, December 5

Philippians 1:3–11

I encourage you to memorize Paul's prayer. As you use it to remember others in prayer, examine how the gospel transforms the tenor of your relationships.

When we pray for and with others, we exercise our trust that the One who has begun a good work among us will bring it to fulfillment. But that good work cannot be divorced from the profound communion (*koinonia*) that God's grace creates among us. God's compassion for us gives us a deep longing for one another. And as we hold others in our hearts, they too hold us in theirs.

In prayer, our love overflows. Not just an emotion, love gives us the knowledge and insight to discern what each of us uniquely has to offer. Rooted in one another's prayers, we can be authentic and sincere without causing offense. This is how a harvest of righteousness through Jesus is fulfilled in our lives.

Dear God, we bring to you all the people we hold in our hearts. Let your grace deepen the communion we share, that our love for one another will overflow with knowledge and insight. Amen.

Thursday, December 6

Luke 3:1–6

This Advent, God calls us to be voices crying in the wilderness. God calls us to prepare the way of the Lord. God calls us to announce the Messiah's coming.

When the Messiah comes, valleys are filled. Mountains and hills are made low. These reversals echo Mary's song (Luke 1:46–55), in which the powerful are brought down, and the lowly are lifted up. They anticipate the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20–26), according to which those who are hungry now will be filled, and those who weep now will laugh.

Most importantly, when the Messiah comes, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Luke 3:6). The Messiah will open our eyes so that we will see God in our midst. We will see the invisible in the visible. Through Jesus, we will see the image of God in one another's faces. And when that happens, the crooked are made straight and rough ways made smooth.

Dear God, our lives and our world need the advent of your Messiah. Give us eyes to see and voices to proclaim the salvation you promise amid everything going on in our lives. Amen.

Friday, December 7

Luke 3:1–6

During Advent we cry, "Prepare the way of the Lord." We cry out for something other than the dysfunction we find within and around us.

By faith and in hope we live in two time zones—our time of exile now, in the wilderness, and the time of God's redemptive future. Even though we still anticipate our full redemption—and the redemption of our entire world—our very anticipation of that redemption is a way of living in that redemption, even if the stark reality of our lives and the world around us makes clear that it has not yet fully arrived.

So our cries are not futile. As we boldly announce the Lord's coming, things do happen. The way of the Lord gets prepared, even in the wilderness. God uses our cries to prepare us for a tomorrow, a new heaven and a new earth, that actually is right here before us—even now.

Dear Lord, use our Advent cries to prepare us—right now—to be a palpable sign of your coming among us, even amid all that counters your truth. Amen.

Saturday, December 8

"Hark, the Glad Sound!" (ELW 239, verse 1)

This week, we have been reflecting on how Advent creates a time warp for us. God's promises from the *past* become a *future* that redefines our present. But something takes place as these three temporal modes are compressed. This time warp—living by faith in a promised future that has not yet come—also has a spatial dimension. It shifts our vision of things.

As we look at our lives differently, we find that we inhabit a different space. Indeed, we might say, we find that we are inhabited by a different reality. Our lives become a habitation for God's indwelling—even amid our mundane, everyday affairs. Our hearts, our deepest yearnings and desires, become a sanctuary—a throne—for the Messiah. And from that place, we find our voice, a voice that now can sing with an authenticity and a sincerity that speak the truths needed to reshape the world around us.

Dear Jesus, our Savior, we long for the justice and mercy only you, the Messiah, can usher in. So inhabit our hearts that our voices can sing the truths you would have us sing. Amen.

Sunday, December 9

"Hark, the Glad Sound!" (ELW 239, verse 2)

In verse 2 of our theme hymn for Advent, prisoners are released from bondage, from the iron fetters that bind them. Advent celebrates the coming of the Messiah, the One who frees us from the powers that keep us hooked in dysfunctional patterns, whether on a personal or a corporate level.

We need at least some degree of or access to wealth, power, and human knowledge or technology to function in life. But even the good things in life can have a demonic hold over us if we allow them to control us—if they become our gods. Even our ideas about God or our own notions of what is good and right can take on a demonic form when we allow them, and not the God who promises mercy and love, to rule our lives.

Only the God who promises mercy and love can free us from these traps and the dysfunction and pain they create. This is the God the Messiah ushers into our lives.

Dear God, help us discern where we are trapped in sin and dysfunction. Help us discern where demonic power has taken hold in our lives. Free us from all that keeps us from loving you and the neighbors you also love. Amen.

Monday, December 10

Zephaniah 3:14–20

Advent is about renewal. However, as God's prophets make clear, the renewal God brings about is not otherworldly. God addresses religious and political corruption. God's prophets not only warn leaders of coming judgment but also proclaim promise and hope. Their announcement of judgment and promise calls us to recognize that the Lord, our God, is in our midst, creating a just and merciful world within and among us.

What happens when we recognize that the Lord is in our midst? For one thing, we no longer need to fear disaster. Why? Because the Lord deals with all our oppressors and the forces that propel them. The Lord saves the lame, gathers the outcast, and transforms shame into praise. The Lord brings us home and restores our fortunes before our eyes. Most importantly, the Lord rejoices over us and renews us with divine love, even singing along in response to our songs of praise.

O Lord, our God, we thank you for being in our midst. Renew us with your love so that we can see and embody the just and merciful world you are creating within and around us. Amen.

Tuesday, December 11

Isaiah 12:2–6

Isaiah's hymn praises God for saving us from evil and destruction. It also gives us a picture of what happens when we trust God's promises of salvation, allowing them to define who we are.

When we rely on God's promises, we have nothing to fear. Why? Because only God can give us the security we long for, regardless of what happens to us. Wealth, power, reputation—and anything else we put in God's place—cannot do this. Only God's "wells of salvation" are inexhaustible.

Moreover, when we rely on God's "wells of salvation," gratitude and joy expand our horizons. We discover that the God we name and exalt is, indeed, at work throughout the entire world. At the same time, we increasingly recognize that this God is in our midst, creating new life within and around us, and this increases our confidence to call on God amid whatever we are facing.

O Holy One, we shout aloud because we know we can call on your name to save us from destruction. We sing for joy because you live in our midst and are continually creating new life within and around us. Amen.

Wednesday, December 12

Philippians 4:4–7

Our thoughts frequently terrorize us. They magnify our fears and intensify our desires. Even when we recognize their deleterious effect on us, it is hard to counter their deep grip on how we perceive and respond to life.

In this passage, Paul gives us three practices for dealing with our thoughts. These are not commands, but exercises for enacting our trust and faith in God. The first is to embrace joy in the Lord always, not as a feeling but as an act of faith. The second is to let our gentleness (or kindness) be known to everyone—not because we feel like it, but because we trust in the Lord's nearness. And the third is to turn our worries into prayers of thanksgiving and supplication.

When we trust God as we do these exercises, we enact the peace of God—which, because it surpasses all our thoughts, is able to guard our hearts and minds in the Messiah, Jesus.

Dear God, give us power to exercise our faith—to live our life as a continual prayer—so that your peace, which far surpasses all our thoughts, might guard our hearts and minds in the Messiah, Jesus. Right now—and throughout the day. Amen.

Thursday, December 13

Luke 3:7–18

If Advent is about renewal, then—as this text about John the Baptist makes clear—it is also about repentance. Centuries later, John's calls to repent still resound. We are the crowds he calls a "brood of vipers." We are the ones he tells to flee from the wrath to come, because of the havoc we wreak on our relationships and communities. We are the ones whose presumptions to privilege he questions. As he warns, trees that do not bear good fruit will be axed. All that cannot tolerate the light of truth and justice will ultimately dissolve.

What then should we do? Share our excess clothes and food. Only take what we need. Avoid extorting money—or anything else that is not ours—with threats and accusations. Repentance means changing our lifestyle. It means measuring our use of wealth, power, and privilege against God's—and not this world's—standards of truth and justice.

O God, give us power to repent. Help us see the chaos we wreak when we misuse the wealth, power, and privilege you have given us. Amen.

Friday, December 14

Luke 3:7–18

We usually associate grace with feeling good. Nevertheless, grace is actually the presence of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the Spirit is like fire, which gives off heat, but also burns up anything that cannot withstand it.

If water symbolizes God's presence in creation, then fire symbolizes God's presence as Spirit. Thus, John's baptism is associated with water and Jesus' baptism is associated with the "Holy Spirit and fire." As the Messiah, Jesus ushers in the anticipated age of the Spirit—an age when "all flesh" will see and experience God's presence without being destroyed.

Baptized into Jesus' death and life, we have received the Holy Spirit. Like the fire in Moses' burning bush, the Spirit now burns within us without consuming us. Yet this Spirit also burns with unquenchable fire everything in our lives that cannot withstand God's presence. Can we receive this as "good news"?

Dear Jesus, we thank you for giving us the same Holy Spirit who empowered your life. Help us to receive as "good news" the ways the Spirit burns up everything in our lives that cannot withstand God's reign of justice and mercy. Amen.

Saturday, December 15

"Hark, the Glad Sound!" (ELW 239, verse 3)

We often spiritualize the gospel. We think it only affects our feelings or ideas. We forget that it also touches our bodies and relationships. Yet if there is anything that the biblical texts for Advent make clear, it is that salvation affects the totality of our lives.

As Messiah, Jesus ushers in God's reign of mercy, righteousness, and justice (Jeremiah 9:23–24). Jesus brings mercy to bind broken hearts, righteousness to cure bleeding souls, and justice to enrich the humble poor. Repenting and trusting the gospel touches our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies.

Moreover, as the gospel renews and transforms us, we discover that our relationships and the communities in which we find ourselves are also renewed and transformed. We discover that the burning fire of the Holy Spirit within and among us burns away everything in our personal and corporate lives that cannot withstand God's reign of mercy, righteousness, and justice.

Dear Jesus, bind up broken hearts, cure bleeding souls, and enrich the humble poor with the treasures of your grace. Let loose your messianic age of the Spirit, within and among us, now. Amen.

Sunday, December 16

"Hark, the Glad Sound!" (ELW 239, verse 4)

Advent has much in common with Lent. If you have followed the Advent texts these past couple of weeks, you have probably noticed they are replete with judgment and calls for repentance.

Yet these calls are rooted in promise and hope. God has won the victory over disaster and destruction. The Holy One now lives in our midst. The Prince of Peace has come and will continue to come into our lives, giving us the peace that surpasses all understanding. The Lord now sings along in response to our songs of praise. Eternal arches ring with a welcome that resounds not only in the heavens but also in every aspect of our mundane lives.

Thus, we draw on inexhaustible wells of salvation. We can call on Jesus' name and expect that the Messiah's love will so permeate and renew our lives that it spills over into the communities we inhabit.

O Jesus, our Prince of Peace, we welcome you into our lives. We shout and sing your praises with glad hosannas! May your love so renew and permeate our lives that it spills over into the communities we inhabit. Amen.

Monday, December 17

Micah 5:2–5a

If you're engaged in some aspect of church ministry, perhaps there isn't much at one week before Christmas Eve that feels like peace. Even if you're not in a formal ministry position, you're likely busy planning and preparing for Christmas celebrations with family and friends and doing some last-minute shopping. But as the prophet Micah foreshadows in this passage, the peace of the Lord is something that magnifies God's limitless power by breaking into the lives of everyone, even a little clan of Judah. Granted, the peace he was likely referring to wasn't a reference to relief from busy holiday schedules, but actual conflict with the neighboring Assyrians. Perhaps we know some aspects of conflict too well in our own context—with neighbors abroad or even next door. Pray with the whole church this Advent that the Lord may fill you, and even whoever or whatever causes you conflict, with hope for peace in all times.

Prince of Peace, in this time of waiting, give us the strength to do what should require little strength: to know and dwell fully in your peace. Amen.

Tuesday, December 18

Luke 1:46b–55

We celebrate lots of different traditions this time of year, many of which have been passed down through generations. But the Magnificat that Mary sings in this well-known narrative from Luke is perhaps the most cherished by us churchy folk. Mary's song of thanksgiving and devotion celebrates everything that the gift of Jesus has done for humanity. It brought surprising reversals: lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry, sending the rich away empty. Most importantly, the gift of Jesus has brought us closer to our God than we ever could have imagined. By bearing Godself in a servant named Mary, God served the world with great love and inspires us for the same service.

As you think about and plan for your holiday traditions this year, consider starting a new one—perhaps performing an act of service alongside your loved ones for the sake of someone in need. This is what it means to celebrate the true meaning of Christ(mas).

Guide us in humble service this season and all our days. Not because we are obliged, but because you have made us able. Amen.

Wednesday, December 19

Hebrews 10:5–10

My three-year-old will not be good at Advent this year. He does not like waiting. As anyone with a toddler knows, patience is not their strong suit. But having a strong will to do things the way they want is in their arsenal.

I often hear from parishioners that they want so strongly to understand God's will for their lives. I hear them asking if God has some preordained plan for them. Inherent in this question is a yearning to identify a sense of purpose and perhaps an explanation as to why certain things happen. But today's excerpt from the letter to the Hebrews makes an important point in this regard: as Christians, we understand that God's hope for us is that we do God's will. "What is that will?" you may ask. The answer: that we live like Christ in service to others. The broken realities of this world haven't changed God's plan for us, nor will they ever. Live and love in service, and you will have realized God's will for your life.

Willing God, open our hearts, even in the darkest of times, to understand that your will for us is clear in the story of Jesus: that we serve as we have been served. Amen.

Thursday, December 20

Luke 1:39–45

Perhaps we haven't been in Mary's or Elizabeth's situation: becoming pregnant when no one expected it, let alone becoming bearers of important messengers of God's kingdom. But we have all asked, "Why has this happened to me?" Usually, it comes up in times of diagnosis of disease or a traumatic accident. But rarely do we respond optimistically when asking this question. What if we were to respond as these faithful women did when the ways of this world were against them? Mary sings her Magnificat and Elizabeth celebrates that her baby leaps for joy *in utero*.

We may feel at times like the world is against us. Women in particular today, like Mary and Elizabeth, may still face circumstances that bring sorrow. Yet we pray this Advent that stories like the joy of Mary and Elizabeth, even in the throes of hardship, may instill in us new perspectives of faith amid adversity that can inspire others to hope in God's promises.

Lord of all hopefulness, move our hearts to sing praises when you call us to something that challenges us. Amen.

Friday, December 21

Luke 1:39–45

They say Advent is a journey—four weeks of spiritual exploration that lead us to the joy of Jesus' birth at Christmas. We read that Mary went with haste to visit Elizabeth. That would have been quite an expedition in those days, since the route from Nazareth to the hill-country town of Hebron, the traditional home of Zechariah and Elizabeth, was more than one hundred miles. I've always been a fan of adventures, especially ones fraught with danger around every turn. I want to know more details about Mary's adventure in this story. Did she go by herself those many miles? Did she have an animal to ride? Did she run into any trouble?

Whether we're ready for them or not, these adventures, these journeys of faith, can present themselves at any time. We have to ask ourselves, "Are we confident enough in God's presence with us at every turn?" Talk about a journey of faith!

Faithful Shepherd, you have called us to adventures we cannot understand. Well up in our souls the faith needed to sing your praises even when the road is treacherous. Amen.

Saturday, December 22

"Hark, the Glad Sound!" (ELW 239, verse 4)

Who would have thought that peace would be so loud? When we imagine a sense of peace, it usually includes some momentary silence from the noise our busy lives create. In this season of Advent and for those in colder climates, perhaps we picture gently falling snow while we sit wrapped in a blanket by the fire. But Christ's entry into the world warrants a loud rejoicing!

This classic Christmas hymn confirms our calling to a raucous celebration of the Prince of Peace and his arrival. A new ruler has come to power, but in the most unexpected way—arriving as a vulnerable baby born to a lowly woman named Mary. And can you just imagine making those heavenly eternal arches ring? Certainly, that's no easy task. It might take some massive and unified singing, like that of every voice in creation bellowing together the name of Christ as King. Wouldn't that be a special thing to witness in our lifetime?

Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest! Lord God, give the whole world the voice to sing your peace and love this Christmas and always. Amen.

Sunday, December 23

"Hark, the Glad Sound!"

(ELW 239, verse 4)

You don't see many "welcome" mats anymore at people's front doors. Instead, it's common nowadays for there to be a video camera pointed at you in greeting, and possibly a PA system used to communicate with you before you are granted access and finally welcomed. As Christians, throughout time we've known the welcome of our shared identity as followers of God's son, Jesus. The main symbol of our faith, the cross, has acted as a symbol of welcome on church steeples and buildings for centuries for those looking for sanctuary. I've always had mixed feelings about my church's building having controlled-access doors with cameras perched above. Of course, it's been deemed necessary as a security measure for our staff and the building contents.

In spite of this, as Christians, we are called to welcome people into our congregation, our family of faith. We don't need a building for that. All we need is a good Christian greeting in that beloved name of Jesus.

Prince of Peace, remind us about what it means to welcome all in your name. Move us to be your church outside our walls, too, with welcoming words and actions. Amen.

Monday, December 24

Isaiah 9:2–7

It's difficult to miss Isaiah's focus on the influence of light in this world. Isaiah is speaking both literally and metaphorically. His hearers know the usefulness of light in dark places, but his message about the coming Messiah as the light (reconciliation) in a dark (sinful) world is most poignant, not only in Advent but also in the world's entire experience of waiting for that New Jerusalem, that city on a hill that cannot help but shine.

But even though light is a useful tool (and metaphor), we are stubborn. We don't want light shining on and exposing our darkness—things for which we are ashamed. Yet therein lies the other amazing power of light: it can become strong enough to burn. Sure, it may hurt our pride at first to bear our darkness into the light. But once that darkness is burned away completely, we can radiate the light and love of God in Jesus, as we were created to do.

Jesus Christ, light of the world, shine brightly in the deepest depths of our darkest places. Give us courage to endure the burn so that we can let our light shine before others. Amen.

Tuesday, December 25

Christmas Day

Luke 2:1–14, (15–20)

A blessed Christmas to one and all! Maybe, like Joseph and Mary, you've gone back to your hometowns to celebrate Christ's birth with family and friends. That's what this narrative of a census as a prelude to Jesus' birth always brings to mind. Isn't it a funny notion that the tradition of going home for Christmas was begun by Jesus' parents? But not everyone has a hometown—at least not anymore. Not everyone has their "own town" to return to where people know them and their family name.

The church has become this place for many. The fellowship of my congregation and yours is where people can come and count and be registered. All because of Jesus. Whether they—or you—have been a "Chreaster" worshiper (an Urban Dictionary word for people who attend only Christmas and Easter services) or are at church every day of the week, you count! Everyone counts in God's kingdom census. And everyone is welcomed home.

Almighty God, we give you thanks this Christmas Day for the birth of your son, Jesus, who came into this world so that all may have a place to belong and be registered with you. Amen.

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