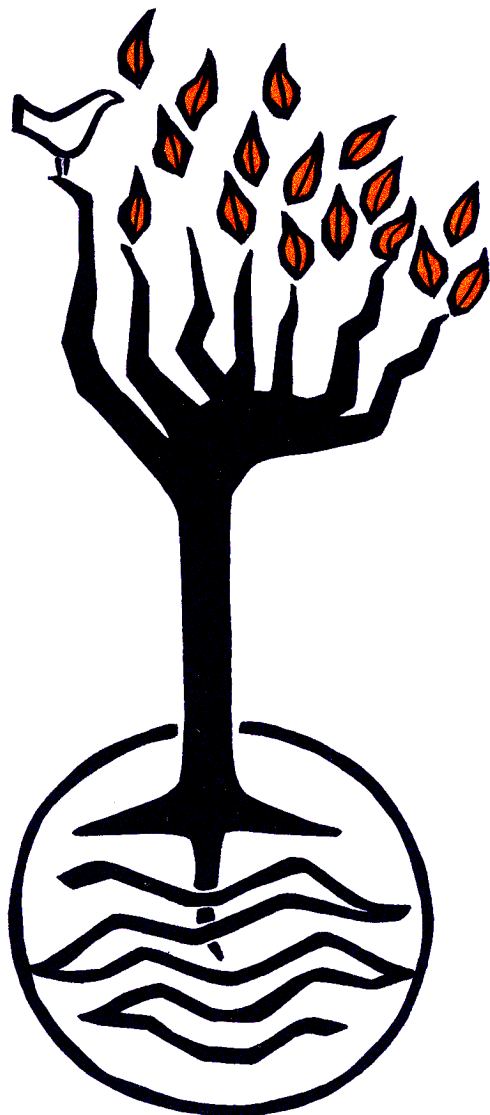


Advent and Christmas; *A fresh look at an ancient tradition*



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Introduction

the problem

Christmas is potentially one of the most inspirational and enjoyable festivals in the entire church year. The activities often associated with Christmas can be a true blessing: celebrating our faith, holding family reunions, sharing cards and gifts with one another, greeting one another with words of *comfort and good cheer*. But somewhere along the way, much of this has been lost in the busy-ness of the season. A woman once described her family's Christmas experience in the following way:

It was awful. Money was tight, and we didn't want to disappoint the kids, so we bought too many gifts on credit. It took until July to pay off the bills. There were school programs on Thursdays, parties on Fridays and Saturdays, and open houses on Sundays. By the 25th we were so exhausted that we couldn't move. My husband's family came to our home on Christmas Day so I spent four days cleaning and shopping and cooking. I was too tired to worship on Christmas Eve, and we had to get started so early on Christmas Day that our family never even made it to church. I was glad when December 26th came along and Christmas was over. I never want that to happen again! This year, something has to change, but I just don't know how to start...

Unfortunately, that woman's experience is all too common. The holiday season has become, for many people, physically exhausting, financially stressful, and spiritually draining. She is right: It shouldn't be this way. Something has to change. But what?

the solution

Many are finding that a return to the ancient Christian tradition of Advent and Christmas provides an answer to this question. This move will require us to intentionally shift our focus from the events and traditions that our society has embraced to others that are less popular and somewhat difficult to follow. But the effort it takes to do so will be well worth it – and may lead to a celebration of Christmas that is more meaningful and more enriching than what we otherwise might have experienced.

this booklet

The purpose of this booklet is to help people of faith celebrate the days that surround Christmas in a way that is uniquely Christian. Its intent is to suggest a number of actions that may help renew our focus on the birth of Christ, so that our Christmas celebrating might be less hectic and draining – and more meaningful and fulfilling. These actions include:

- ✦ regular times of worship and devotion at home during the week.
- ✦ faithful attendance at Sunday morning worship services with our own congregation – remembering that these seasons are not private times of devotion, but times when God's people work together to prepare for the coming of Christ.
- ✦ honoring the ancient practice of observing Advent – using the four weeks that precede Christmas to align ourselves with the people of old who awaited the arrival of God's Messiah.
- ✦ intentionally limiting the number of activities that we will allow ourselves to experience – carving out a time for peace and quietness as we prepare for Christmas.
- ✦ celebrating *The Twelve Days of Christmas* – allowing ourselves to enjoy the fullness of the Christmas season.
- ✦ establishing practices of alternative giving – seeking to remove some of the focus from the commercial side of Christmas, and replace it with a deeper awareness of the gift that God has given us: the gift of salvation.
- ✦ participation in benevolent actions – making the effort to remember those who are less fortunate than we are.

an added benefit

As these elements are gradually grafted to our own family traditions, we will begin to experience Christmas in more depth, and will be blessed accordingly. But there is an added benefit: If we Christians celebrate Christmas in a way that is subtly different from our non-Christian neighbors, it may well catch their attention and cause them to ask us why. When that happens, we have created an opportunity to share our faith in a way that is natural and non-threatening. The most effective witness is the one that is solicited by another!

Advent and Christmas; *A primer*

Advent; *A season of hope*

The season of Advent in the liturgical church year begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, and continues through December 24th. These four weeks have traditionally been set aside as a time for Christians to prepare to once again hear the news of the Savior's birth. In the earliest of days, Advent was a time when converts to the faith prepared to receive the Sacrament of Holy Baptism on January 6th, *The Epiphany of our Lord*, an early baptismal festival. This baptismal emphasis still remains during Advent in many churches.

The word *Advent* means *coming* and refers to the coming of Christ to us. More than a thousand years ago Bernard of Clairvaux taught that Advent involves the coming of Christ in three ways:

- ✦ his coming in the past, as the Babe of Bethlehem.
- ✦ his coming in the present, through grace, into the hearts of those who believe.
- ✦ his coming in the future, at the end of all time.

These three themes develop the focus for the season: preparing ourselves to experience the arrival of Christ in our lives. We do this primarily in two ways: first by recalling the ministry of John, the Baptizer. His purpose was to prepare the people of his day for the Lord. Second, we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ by recalling God's Hebrew people, the Jews, who for centuries before the time of Jesus awaited the arrival of God's Messiah.

Christians have the confidence that through faith we can be reassured of the gifts of forgiveness and eternal life. Consequently, the coming of our Lord is not an event which we fear, but one we anticipate with great hope. And so at its deepest level, the season of Advent, this season of waiting for the coming of our Lord, is a season of hope. We hope for Christ to return and bring our lives to completion. We hope for our world to experience the renewal that God wishes for it. And we believe that the One in whom we place our hope has the power to make this come to pass.

The gift of *Hope* is one of the true treasures of our faith tradition. Many in our day see a bleak and frightening future for the world. But Christians are able to look the future square in the eye, with all of its dangers and possibilities, and still have hope! This hope comes from knowing that at the end of our earthly journey, Christ will be there with welcoming arms. This is what the season of Advent is all about: recalling that hope, and seeking ways to build on it in our individual lives.

Christmas; *A season of celebration*

The season of Christmas begins on *The Nativity of our Lord*, more commonly celebrated as *Christmas Day*, which is celebrated on December 25th. Christmas Day gets its name from the fact that the central event in the early church's celebration of the Nativity was the *Christ Mass*, a celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion held in honor of Christ's birth. The first *Christ Mass* of the season was often held at midnight, as the day began. This led to the tradition of holding a worship service on Christmas Eve – a tradition that survives in many churches today. Since January 6th is *The Epiphany of Our Lord*, and the first day of the season of Epiphany, the season of Christmas concludes on January 5th (the 12th day of Christmas).

Christmas is a celebration of the belief that God loves us enough to choose to be born among us. Christ's birth in Bethlehem is the beginning of God's new plan to welcome all the people of the world into the family of faith. As we reflect on this great example of God's love for us, it can move us into a deeper experience of the joy and peace that only comes from God.

However, it is no secret that Christmas, for many, is a time of terrible despair. Our culture lifts up "Norman Rockwell" images of smiling families, gathered around a table piled high with food, with any number of presents lying under the tree, waiting to be opened. The images that flood our minds during this time of year only seem to increase the pain felt by those who are lonely, or hungry, or too poor to provide gifts for their loved ones. Our responsibility as Christians during this Christmas season is to remind others (those who are less fortunate and those who are more fortunate) that in this season we remember the Christ who said, "Blessed are the poor... the hungry... you who weep... the meek..." (St. Luke 6:20-36) As we remember that Christ, as we begin to recover a central role for that Christ in our

Christmas traditions, we will begin to hear a message that gives hope to all people of faith, regardless their physical, emotional, financial or spiritual wellbeing.

Advent and Christmas

The worship life of a congregation is enriched when these two seasons are understood and kept distinct from one another. Given that our society doesn't participate in Advent waiting, and celebrates Christmas from Thanksgiving (Halloween?) to December 25th, this can prove to be quite a task! But it is a task well worth undertaking. The results can be a Christmas celebration which enriches one's faith, and lifts one's spirits.

Daily Devotions for Advent and Christmas

Many people talk about having a regular time of devotions in their home, but relatively few ever make that desire a reality. You have taken the first step by reading this booklet. Here are some helpful hints for following through on your intentions:

- ✦ Set aside a time each day for everyone in your home to gather together.
- ✦ Choose an environment that lets you concentrate on the message for the day. If you have a telephone answering machine or service, you might want to let it handle any incoming calls, and return messages once your devotions are over.
- ✦ Perhaps you would like to use a *Jesse Tree* for the focus of your devotional experience during Advent. See Appendix A: "**The Jesse Tree; A resource for observing Advent**" (beginning on page 29) for more information.
- ✦ Each devotion ends with a question or questions designed to help you reflect on the individual or event described in the Bible passage. Take a few moments to discuss these or any other questions you might have.
- ✦ December 6th is *The Feast Day of Saint Nicholas*, and a good time to celebrate the memory of Nicholas by participating in charitable actions as a family. See Appendix B: "**Saint Nicholas; A model of alternative giving**" (beginning on page 30) for some suggestions as to how you might do that.
- ✦ December 23rd or December 24th are traditional times to "trim the Christmas Tree." Perhaps on these days you might consider taking down your *Jesse Tree* ornaments and decorating your tree with Christmas ornaments, singing a few Carols, and remembering the birth of Jesus during your daily devotional time.
- ✦ Most congregations celebrate the birth of Christ on December 24th and/or December 25th. You will want to make plans to worship on one or both of those days. If you are out of town, seek out a congregation with which you can worship (for Lutherans, visit www.elca.org and select "Find a Congregation").
- ✦ December 25th through January 5th is the traditional time to celebrate the birth of the Savior among us. Perhaps during these twelve days, you might hang the number of that day on the tree, share a small gift with one another (or with a different member of the household each day), and read together the Christmas devotion in this book assigned for that day.

The First Sunday in Advent

November 29, 2009
November 28, 2010

November 27, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Protect us by your strength and save us from the threatening dangers of our sins, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** Isaiah 2:1-5
- Message:** In Isaiah's day, the nation with the strongest arms and the mightiest warriors was the one with the most influence. God's people accepted the reality of that situation, but they had a vision of a world where nations would not fight with each other – a world in which weapons of war would be transformed into implements of sustenance – a world where all people would bow down together in the presence of God. Isaiah knew that this world was yet in the future. But nonetheless, he encouraged the people of Israel to make it their present, anticipating this new world that God would bring about. He said, "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord."
- Discussion:** How will we seek to be peacemakers in our homes, our neighborhoods, and our world, even as we wait for the ultimate peace that only our God can bring?
- Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, the prophet Isaiah holds before us a vision in which all of the nations on earth follow you, and enmity is no longer in their midst. Help us to follow you in our own lives, and be workers for peace and goodwill among all people. This we pray in the name of Jesus, the Christ. Amen.
- Symbol:** Swords being smashed, or swords being turned into plows, are a reminder to us of the vision that Isaiah had: a vision of a world at peace with itself, because God's presence was there.

The First Monday in Advent

November 30, 2009
November 29, 2010

November 28, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** Isaiah 11:1-10
- Message:** Out of death shall come new life. There was a time when the nation of Israel seemed spiritually dead. Its kings refused to follow God. Its people no longer worshipped with zeal. It was as if a mighty oak tree had been chopped off, two feet above the ground. But Isaiah's prophecy told the people that God would change that. Out of the stump that their nation had become, a new shoot would spring forth. And that shoot would bring about faithfulness, obedience, and new life. We know that "shoot" to be Jesus, (the descendant of Jesse, King David's father), whom we meet regularly in Word and Sacrament.
- Discussion:** How has the presence of Jesus been like a shoot of new life for you? In what ways has your relationship with him enriched your living, and blessed your days?
- Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, in this Advent season, help us to prepare room in our hearts for the Messiah, the Christ, the man who came to us as Jesus of Nazareth. He is our only source of salvation, and it is in his name that we pray. Amen.
- Symbol:** The Jesse tree is a reminder of Isaiah's prophecy that from the descendants of Jesse (King David's father) would come the Messiah. A Jesse Tree in our own home helps us to remember that Jesus, the Christ, is the one of whom the prophets spoke.
At the beginning of this Advent season, perhaps you might erect a Jesse tree in your home (an evergreen tree that will become your Christmas tree, or a tree made from a branch taken off of a larger tree in your yard, anchored in a bucket of sand).

The First Tuesday in Advent

*December 1, 2009
November 30, 2010*

November 29, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** Isaiah 40:1-11
- Message:** Years before the birth of Saint John, the Baptizer, the prophet Isaiah spoke to God's people. He told them that a voice would cry out in the wilderness calling all faithful people to prepare themselves for the coming of God's Messiah. In this season of Advent, we continue to listen to these words, believing that Isaiah spoke them about Saint John. Saint John encouraged the people of his day to prepare themselves by repenting of their sins, and turning anew towards God.
- Discussion:** In what ways are our lives in need of repentance today? In what ways have we crowded God out of our lives? By yourself (or with your family or your faith partner) set your sights on some specific actions of renewal in your life. As you prayerfully act on those resolutions, know that God's Holy Spirit will assist you to grow in your level of faith and faithfulness.
- Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, you sent your servant John to prepare people to receive your Son, Jesus Christ. Prepare us as well to welcome him into our lives. We pray to you through that same Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.
- Symbol:** A trumpet amid trees could remind us of the voice that cried out in the wilderness: Saint John, the Baptizer.

The First Wednesday in Advent

*December 2, 2009
December 1, 2010*

November 30, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** Genesis 1:1-2:3
- Message:** "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." The story of God's activity among us begins by affirming that our loving God has created all the earth, its vegetation, and its inhabitants. As we look around us, we see that God has blessed us with the gifts of beauty, pleasure, food, companionship, purpose, and meaning. The closer attention we pay to creation, the more we become aware of the subtle ways in which God has prepared the earth to take care of us. As we serve as good stewards (caretakers) of this world, we participate with God in caring for its inhabitants.
- Discussion:** What blessings from God do you most often remember? What blessings from God do you most often forget? How will you intentionally care for God's creation this coming year?
- Closing Prayer:** Loving God, you have given us the gift of this earth to bless us and sustain us. Help us to care for it faithfully, as we await the day when you will return and bring it to completion. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, your dear Son. Amen.
- Symbol:** A "Globe" or a garden or people holding hands can remind us that our world was created by a God who loves us and wants to care for us.

The First Thursday in Advent

*December 3, 2009
December 2, 2010*

December 1, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** St. Matthew 3:1-12
- Message:** We have all been taught, "It is better to give than to receive." But more and more we hear of how hard it is to receive the gift of forgiveness. We are tempted to think that our sins are so bad that we cannot be forgiven. We are tempted to think that the forgiver is not sincere. We are slow to let words of forgiveness touch our hearts. Yet that is what the ministry of St. John was all about. For all of his talk about fire and condemnation, at the heart of his ministry he sought to baptize the repentant, and assure them that they had been forgiven. In the experience of forgiveness, we meet our Savior most fully.
- Discussion:** For what in your life do you still seek forgiveness? To whom do you need to speak a word of forgiveness? Remember that God's love is so deep that forgiveness is always available to all who believe.
- Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, John called his listeners to confess their sins, and be washed by the waters of baptism. Help us to respond to his message. Remind us of our sin, and assure us of your forgiveness, which is promised to all who have been baptized into the life and death of Jesus, your dear Son, in whose name we pray. Amen.
- Symbol:** A figure with a camel hair coat and a leather belt, or the locust and wild honey that was his food, can remind us of St. John, the Baptizer, whose mission was to announce that the Savior had come.

The First Friday in Advent

*December 4, 2009
December 3, 2010*

December 2, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** Jonah 1:1-4:11
- Message:** The book of Jonah has been assigned for today. Take time to read it: it is no longer than an average children's story. Nineveh was the capital city of a people who had been at war with Israel for years – and who had committed unspeakable atrocities against God's people. Jonah's resistance was something that many Israelites would have felt. Why should he serve as a prophet to this evil, disgusting city? He didn't want to see these people receive God's love. They certainly didn't deserve it! Yet God chose to love them anyway. And God chose to work through Jonah to do it (perhaps seeking to teach Jonah a thing or two in the process). Of course, that is the way God works: breaking barriers to carry the gift of love to more and more people.
- Discussion:** Which barriers might God be calling you to break today? What will you do to follow God's call?
- Closing Prayer:** God: like Jonah, we are often unwilling to serve you when the consequences seem great. Help us be more open to your call to ministry. Use us to move others to faith, that the world might better prepare for your return. We pray in the name of Jesus, the Christ. Amen.
- Symbol:** The image of a whale can remind us that God was able to work through Jonah to bless the people of Nineveh, even though Jonah was a reluctant servant.

The First Saturday in Advent

*December 5, 2009
December 4, 2010*

December 3, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** Genesis 8:1-11, 9:8-17 (or, if you wish: Genesis 6:1-9:17)
- Message:** In the story of Noah, we see the two sides of God. God is pictured as a wrathful judge who destroys that which is evil. God is also pictured as a loving one who saves those who are faithful. We fool ourselves when we attempt to believe in a God who saves even the unrighteous and the unbelievers. Scripture will not let us hold that to be true. But we are encouraged in faith when we remember that Noah, who heard God's Word and followed it, was helped to prepare for the end that came in his day – and because of it his entire family was saved.
- Discussion:** What is God's Word for us today? What would the Gospel of Jesus Christ have us believe? How does God prepare us, so that when the end comes we, like Noah, will be among the faithful?
- Closing Prayer:** Dear God, we admit that if it were up to us, we would be among the unrighteous and unfaithful. But you have given us the gift of your Holy Spirit, so that we might be moved to faith, and be graced with the righteousness that comes only from Jesus Christ. Continue to strengthen us in that faith, and bring us at last to our home with you. This we pray in the name of Jesus, your dear Son. Amen.
- Symbol:** An ark (traditionally, a barn on top of a boat) or a rainbow would be helpful reminders of God's loving relationship with Noah, and the covenant made by God never to destroy the earth again by flood.

The Second Sunday in Advent

*December 6, 2009
December 5, 2010*

December 4, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** St. Mark 1:1-8
- Message:** He grabs the believer's head, and forces it under the surface of the water. He lifts the head up just long enough for one quick, frantic breath, and down it goes again. Yet another time, and the baptism is complete. Frightening. Forceful. Hardly a pleasant moment. But the image is not lost in the translation. By the waters of baptism, the old life has been put to death, and a new life has been raised up. This was the ministry of St. John, the Baptizer. We too have received this gift. Our old faithless self has been put to death, and our new life of believing has been born. Luther taught that this death and resurrection must happen not just at our Baptism, but every day of our lives.
- Discussion:** Do you begin each day by remembering your baptism? What of your old self continually needs to be put to death? What new life is God seeking to give birth in you this day?
- Closing Prayer:** Gracious and loving Lord, to prepare the people for the coming of Christ, St. John helped them to see their need for forgiveness. Help us to see that we need to be forgiven as well. And grant that we may embrace your words of forgiveness with believing hearts. Amen.
- Symbol:** The image of a man standing in the river (perhaps surrounded by others) can remind us of St. John, the Baptizer, whose baptism assured the repentant that they were forgiven.

The Second Monday in Advent

*December 7, 2009
December 6, 2010*

December 5, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you once called John the Baptist to witness to the coming of your Son and to prepare his way. Grant us the wisdom to see your purpose today and the openness to do your will, that we may witness to Christ's coming and so prepare his way; we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
- Scripture:** Genesis 37:1-6
- Message:** Jacob's favorite son was Joseph. Now anyone who has a brother or sister knows the kind of jealousy that arises in families. Joseph's brothers were livid at the special treatment he received from their father. So they sold him into slavery, thinking they would never have to deal with him again. But the rest of the story (chapters 38-45) reveals that God was able to use their actions for good. While Joseph was in Egypt, he interpreted the Pharaoh's dreams, and helped Egypt prepare for a great famine by storing a large amount of grain. Because of what Joseph's brothers did, thousands were saved from starvation.
- Discussion:** We too experience events that are tragically painful. They seem to be evil, and not connected with good in any way. But our God can even use events like these to work for good. How has that happened in your life? What evil has God used for good?
- Closing Prayer:** Lord God, as we look to the future we know that some share of pain and trouble will come our way. Help us to remember that no matter what might befall us, you will be there for us, working good out of even our most troubling experiences. Amen
- Symbol:** Eleven sheaves bowing to one sheaf; the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing; or a many-colored coat can remind us of this story – and of how God can work good even from humanity's most evil deeds.

The Second Tuesday in Advent

*December 8, 2009
December 17 2010*

December 6, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you once called John the Baptist to witness to the coming of your Son and to prepare his way. Grant us the wisdom to see your purpose today and the openness to do your will, that we may witness to Christ's coming and so prepare his way; we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
- Scripture:** Exodus 3:1-15
- Message:** The old spiritual says: "Take your shoes off Moses, you're on holy ground. I am the Lord your God." And it indeed was holy ground. It was the place where God first approached Moses, and called him to be at the center of the greatest story in all of the Hebrew Scriptures: the deliverance of Israel from its slavery in Egypt. We notice an element of hesitancy in Moses' initial response, but that hesitancy was soon overcome by God's persistence, and brother Aaron's company – and the rest, as they say, is history. The deliverance of Israel has often been described as a parallel to the deliverance from death that we experience through faith in Christ.
- Discussion:** There are many parallels to the burning bush today, because every place where God has called you to a ministry is holy ground too! Where have you sensed God's call to ministry? How have you responded?
- Closing Prayer:** Dear God, we don't expect a burning bush, but help us hear your call to us. Work through us to spread the good news of Jesus Christ, so that others might be delivered from their bondage to sin and death. We pray this through the one who freed us: Jesus, the Christ. Amen.
- Symbol:** A bush that is burning, but not consumed, reminds us of the place where God spoke to Moses, and called him to help deliver the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt.

The Second Wednesday in Advent

*December 9, 2009
December 8, 2010*

December 7, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you once called John the Baptist to witness to the coming of your Son and to prepare his way. Grant us the wisdom to see your purpose today and the openness to do your will, that we may witness to Christ's coming and so prepare his way; we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
- Scripture:** Isaiah 61:1-3
- Message:** There are many images in Scripture of what life with God will be like. We think immediately of pearly gates and winged, harp-strumming angels. But other images abound: an endless wedding banquet, a father welcoming home a lost son, a golden city... Advent is a time of preparing for the day when God will return to be with us. Whether that is at the end of our own life, or the end of the world as we know it, we await that day with confidence and hope – trusting that God will be there for us.
- Discussion:** What is your vision of that day? What stories from Scripture do you remember that help you understand it? What will be the first thing that you say to God on that day? Or the first thing that you expect God to say to you?
- Closing Prayer:** Give us vision, dear God, and the creativity to dream of what it may be like when you return in glory. Keep us faithful, that we might be included among the saved in that day. Allow these words of Isaiah to inspire us and comfort us. Amen.
- Symbol:** Isaiah presented a number of images of the day when God's Messiah would come: here we read of prison doors thrown open, and tall oak trees representing righteousness.

The Second Thursday in Advent

*December 10, 2009
December 9, 2010*

December 8, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you once called John the Baptist to witness to the coming of your Son and to prepare his way. Grant us the wisdom to see your purpose today and the openness to do your will, that we may witness to Christ's coming and so prepare his way; we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
- Scripture:** First Samuel 16:14-23
- Message:** A simple shepherd boy. A ruddy faced, handsome young boy; yet hardly one worth mentioning. It was this boy that God chose to become Israel's first great King. It was this boy who had the ability to comfort Saul when evil spirits overcame him. It was this boy who defeated the giant Goliath. It was this boy, who despite his weaknesses and failings, was used by God to be a great and powerful leader of Israel. Years later another boy was born. Another whose hometown was Bethlehem. Another who was largely ignored by the powerful and mighty ones of his day. Yet through this one came the salvation of the world. Through this one, the prophecies of old were fulfilled. It is this one whose birth is awaited during the season of Advent.
- Discussion:** How has he touched your life? In what ways has this humble child from Bethlehem given you faith and love and hope?
- Closing Prayer:** Gracious God you raise the humble and bring the mighty to their knees. As you touched the life of David, your servant; and as you were born among us in the person of Jesus, the Christ; be present in our lives as well. Through the same Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.
- Symbol:** A harp is a good reminder of the ability that David had to comfort King Saul. David himself would soon enough be King, and one of Israel's greatest Kings.

The Second Friday in Advent

*December 11, 2009
December 10, 2010*

December 9, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you once called John the Baptist to witness to the coming of your Son and to prepare his way. Grant us the wisdom to see your purpose today and the openness to do your will, that we may witness to Christ's coming and so prepare his way; we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
- Scripture:** St. Luke 3:7-18
- Message:** St. John the Baptizer had a gift: he was able to help people see their own sinfulness. All sorts of people came to him: rich, poor, humble, proud, famous, unknown... St. John made each of them a bit more aware of the ways that they had disappointed God. The good news, of course, is that St. John made each of them a bit more aware of their need for a Savior, and God's gift of forgiveness. That's what John's ministry was all about: preparing the people to receive Jesus by first understanding their need for forgiveness.
- Discussion:** Has Advent done that for you? Have you thought about your own need for Christ? That is, perhaps, the best way to prepare for Christmas.
- Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, we know our lives are not nearly as fruitful as you would have them be. Help us recognize the ways that we have fallen short. Help us to believe the words of forgiveness we need to hear. And strengthen us to better followers of your Word. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.
- Symbol:** St. John's preaching was filled with images that could serve as decorations on a Jesse Tree: a tree bearing healthy fruit, stones being turned into children of Abraham, an axe being laid to a tree, sandals that he was unworthy to untie...

The Second Saturday in Advent

*December 12, 2009
December 11, 2010*

December 10, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you once called John the Baptist to witness to the coming of your Son and to prepare his way. Grant us the wisdom to see your purpose today and the openness to do your will, that we may witness to Christ's coming and so prepare his way; we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
- Scripture:** First Kings 3:3-28
- Message:** If David was the greatest King, then his son Solomon was certainly the wisest and wealthiest of all the Kings. Today's Bible reading gives two examples of his great wisdom. First, when God offered to give him anything he wanted, Solomon chose wisdom, so that he might fulfill his duties as King in the best way. Second, when faced with a difficult situation, the wisdom God had given him helped him make a decision that was right and just. We too are often faced with difficult decisions – some that tax us both morally and intellectually. We may not be as renowned for our wisdom as Solomon was, but we have access to an even greater resource: the gift of the Holy Spirit. As we spend more and more time with God, we are more and more likely to sense the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives.
- Discussion:** How has God's Holy Spirit helped you to make difficult decisions? When have you experienced an answer to prayer?
- Closing Prayer:** Lord God, the wisdom of Solomon is widely known. As we seek to serve you as followers of the Christ, help us to embrace Solomon's kind of wisdom: seeking to do only what is right and just. This we pray in the name of the King of Kings, Jesus, our Lord. Amen.
- Symbol:** A crown serves as a good reminder of Solomon: the King who knew that wisdom and justice were more important than power or wealth.

The Third Sunday in Advent

December 13, 2009
December 12, 2010

December 11, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you once called John the Baptist to witness to the coming of your Son and to prepare his way. Grant us the wisdom to see your purpose today and openness to do your will, that we may witness to Christ's coming and so prepare his way; we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
- Scripture:** Isaiah 35:1-10
- Message:** Isaiah was a forceful and poetic speaker. The King James Version of the Bible translates him beautifully: "...the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose." A springtime drive in the desert reveals the striking beauty of the soft, delicate blossoms that appear on the rugged saguaro cactus. The unforgiving desert environment makes those flowers appear even more beautiful. This is the image that Isaiah used to picture God's people. The bleakness of their situation made the joy of receiving the Savior all that much more beautiful. It is true in our lives as well. When life has treated us most painfully, then our Savior comes most powerfully. Grief, disappointment, anger, disillusionment, estrangement, loneliness: these are human experiences that all believers have from time to time. But God meets us in these times, loving us, supporting us, giving us the strength to survive.
- Discussion:** How has your faith allowed you to get through experiences like these?
- Closing Prayer:** Dear God, by the strength of your Holy Spirit, allow faith to blossom in our lives. Help us to sense your presence in our midst. And enable us to rejoice in a way that causes others to believe in you as well. This we pray in the name of Jesus, the Christ. Amen.
- Symbol:** A rose growing out of the desert reminds us of the joy that will burst forth from God's people when the Messiah comes in glory.

The Third Monday in Advent

December 14, 2009
December 13, 2010

December 12, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Take away the hindrance of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** Isaiah 6:1-8
- Message:** Isaiah was perhaps one of the greatest of all the prophets. Speaking many years before the time of Jesus, his words are filled with images that have helped us better understand our Lord. But great as he was, Isaiah knew he was not perfect. When faced with the Lord's presence, Isaiah felt "unclean." In the vision recorded in the sixth chapter, Isaiah described a scene where one of the mighty seraphs flew to him with a coal that had been taken from the altar, and with this coal touched his mouth, and removed his guilt. We too have had our guilt removed from us: not with fire, but with water. As the waters of baptism flowed over our heads, we were sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.
- Discussion:** How have you understood this to be good news for you? When have you relied on your Baptism to remind you of the forgiveness that God has given you?
- Closing Prayer:** Gracious Lord, as you cleansed Isaiah with coal and fire, you have cleansed us with water and the Word. Help us to cling to that Word, and always remember the gift of our Baptism, that we might remain faithful to you. We pray in the name of Jesus, who was and who is and who is to come. Amen.
- Symbol:** Tongs and a piece of coal remind us of when Isaiah's lips were cleansed, and he was prepared to serve as a prophet of God.

The Third Tuesday in Advent

*December 15, 2011
December 14, 2009*

December 13, 2010

- Opening Prayer:** Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Take away the hindrance of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** Exodus 12:1-13
- Message:** The Passover. Even to say the word today in many circles causes believers to shudder at the sheer power of the event. Through a series of plagues, God urged Pharaoh to let Israel go, but Pharaoh's heart remained hardened. Each time Pharaoh refused to grant their freedom. Now this last plague: the death of the firstborn. At terrible cost, God won freedom for the Hebrews, and their journey to the Promised Land was given new life. It revealed God as a loyal God, whose promises can be trusted – even in the most dire of situations. At terrible cost, God has won freedom for us as well: freedom from sin and death, purchased by Christ on the cross. Because of that purchase, our journey towards eternal life with God is given new life.
- Discussion:** Through our Baptism into the death and resurrection of our Lord, we are promised forgiveness and eternal life. How does this give you hope, as you await a future reunion with God?
- Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, as you rescued Israel from its slavery so many years ago in Egypt, so today rescue us from the consequences of our sin. Wash us clean through our faith in Christ: the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.
- Symbol:** The image of doorposts and a lintel marked with blood of a lamb are still a powerful reminder to God's people of the Passover – the final plague that led to Israel's deliverance from Egypt.

The Third Wednesday in Advent

*December 16, 2009
December 15, 2010*

December 14, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Take away the hindrance of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** Isaiah 7:10-17
- Message:** King Ahaz was no follower of God. Although he was the king of Judah, he was a wicked and disobedient man. He destroyed those who opposed him, and had no regard for the laws of God. Yet it was to this faithless man that one of the earliest prophecies of Christ was spoken. God had Isaiah say to Ahaz, "Therefore the Lord... will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." God had every reason to ignore Ahaz and work through another, but decided not to. Instead, God continued to reach out to him, even though Ahaz continued to reject God's efforts. So too God works with us. No matter how many times we turn away, God continues to welcome us back to the fold.
- Discussion:** How have you experienced God reaching out to you? Through the caring word of a friend? Through the words of Scripture? Through an experience of healing or peace? To look for God's presence in these ways is to prepare for the coming of the Lord into our hearts.
- Closing Prayer:** Lord God, help us to sense your presence in our midst. Grant that we might recognize the many ways that you touch us, and care for our needs. And guide us towards and even deeper faith in the one of whom Isaiah spoke. We pray in that one's name: Jesus, the Christ. Amen.
- Symbol:** A young woman with a baby reminds us of Isaiah's prophecy to King Ahaz about the birth of the Messiah.

The Third Thursday in Advent

December 17, 2009
December 16, 2010

December 15, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Take away the hindrance of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** Jeremiah 19:1-15
- Message:** Over and over, God's Word came to the people of Israel: turn from your wicked ways, or I will destroy your nation! Prophet after prophet carried this message to the people, but they refused to listen. They refused to follow their God. Finally, God sent Jeremiah (one of the boldest and most faithful prophets) with the last word. "Thus says the LORD of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended." God's expectations of us are no less severe. Yet we need not fear the day of our reckoning. We have been given a tremendous gift: the gift of salvation, through faith in Jesus Christ. We continue to strive to be God's faithful people.
- Discussion:** How does this free you to live a life of hope and joy?
- Closing Prayer:** Dear God, we know that you are a righteous judge, who demands from your people that they be faithful and just. Help us to strive for that in our lives. And when we fail, drive us to the cross, that we might repent and seek your forgiveness. We pray this in the name of Jesus, the Christ, the author of salvation. Amen.
- Symbol:** A broken pot is a reminder of the message that Jeremiah carried to the people of Israel in his day: because they refused to repent of their sin, God's destruction would come upon them.

The Third Friday in Advent

December 18, 2009
December 17, 2010

December 16, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Take away the hindrance of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** St. Luke 1:26-56
- Message:** Two ordinary, unassuming women. Two women who had no children: one married, one engaged. Two women, cousins. Two women who were visited by God, and against all odds gave birth to sons. The stories of these two women begin the Gospel Story. St. Luke remembered for us their fear and their bewilderment. Who would blame them? But St. Luke also recorded their faithfulness in carrying out the ministry that had been appointed to them. Nobody in the world could have imagined that God would do so much with such humble, unimpressive servants. Yet God worked through these women to bring salvation to the world. These women are no longer with us. But their ministry still is: the ministry of bearing Christ to the world.
- Discussion:** How is God calling you to present Christ to others? In what ways might you help others prepare to receive the good news?
- Closing Prayer:** Lord God, it is easy to think that we are not "qualified" for ministry. But, as you worked through two simple first century women to present Christ to the world, so now work through us. Use our words and our actions as a witness to the love you have shown us; through Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Amen.
- Symbol:** A pregnant woman, or two women embracing, or two women singing reminds us that God visited Mary and Elizabeth, and they gave birth to St. John, the Baptist and Jesus, the Christ.

The Third Saturday in Advent

December 19, 2009
December 18, 2010

December 17, 2011

- Opening Prayer: Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Take away the hindrance of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture: Exodus 15: 1-21 (or Exodus 14:1-15:21)
- Message: It was the most amazing thing any of them had ever witnessed. And that was saying a great deal – they had just experienced the whole sequence of plagues that God sent Pharaoh’s way. But this was amazing: trapped between Pharaoh’s approaching army and the Red Sea, Israel was faced with imminent destruction. Then Moses, their leader, stretched his hand out over the sea, and the LORD drove back the waters, allowing their escape. When Pharaoh’s chariots tried to pursue them, the waters crashed back, destroying them all. It was an amazing story of deliverance. It moved the people to song. The scene ends with Miriam and all the others singing and dancing and playing the tambourine, celebrating God’s victory on their behalf. Two other women responded in song many years later, as God visited them, causing them to give birth to John and Jesus, Baptizer and Savior.
- Discussion: What has God done that causes you to rejoice?
- Closing Prayer: Lord God, as Miriam, Mary and Elizabeth rejoiced at your activity in their lives, so too move us to joy as we remember the love you have shown us. This we pray in the name of the one who died for us, that we might be made one with you, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen
- Symbol: A tambourine can remind us of Miriam, whose song of praise on the shores of the Red Sea was echoed by Mary and Elizabeth, whose song of praise rang out before the birth of Jesus and John.

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

December 20, 2009
December 19, 2010

December 18, 2011

- Opening Prayer: Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Take away the hindrance of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture: Micah 5:2-9
- Message: *O Little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by; yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.* Eight centuries before the time of Christ, God’s people still remembered the days when their nation was strong, and King David (a shepherd boy from Bethlehem) was King. But they knew much had changed. Their nation was a shadow of what it had once been, and the neighbors surrounding them were a constant threat to their security. Micah had a word of hope for them. “Another will come” he told them, “who will be even more powerful than King David himself!” And Micah was right. That one did come, as a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. He was the one of whom the prophets spoke. He is the one who will return again.
- Discussion: How are you preparing for his return? How is his return to earth a word of good news for you?
- Closing Prayer: Gracious God, years ago the people of Israel waited the day when their Savior would come. Today we await the day when our Savior will return. Help us to live, confident of the favor you will show us at then end of all time. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.
- Symbol: The town of Bethlehem is a reminder of the birth of our Savior; and the prophet Micah, who comforted God’s people with a word of hope.

The Fourth Monday in Advent

*December 21, 2009
December 20, 2010*

December 19, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you have made yourself known in your Son, Jesus, redeemer of the world. We pray that his birth as a human child will set us free from the old slavery of our sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** Exodus 21:1-21 (St. Matthew 5:17-48)
- Message:** It was Israel's lot to wander for years in the desert, moving towards the Promised Land. But as they wandered, they were not alone: God was with them. At one point on their journey, God gave them a tremendous gift: the knowledge of how to live as a faithful people. In the Ten Commandments, as they have come to be known, God taught those who believed how to trust in the one true God, and how to live in a way that blessed and enriched one another. These commandments are a gift to us as well. They teach us God's will for us. They help to preserve order in society. They remind us of the ways in which we've not been the people God has called us to be. And as they remind us of our sinfulness, they drive us to the cross of Jesus Christ.
- Discussion:** How have the Ten Commandments helped you to see your need for Christ? How have they helped you to know God's will for your life?
- Closing Prayer:** Loving God, you have given us the gift of knowing your will. As we reflect on the Ten Commandments, help us to strive to obey them. And when we fail, help us to turn to the cross, and the forgiveness that you offer us. It is in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.
- Symbol:** Two stone tablets, on which the Ten Commandments are written, are a reminder of the laws that God gave to guide Israel, so that they might live faithfully and peacefully.

The Fourth Tuesday in Advent

*December 22, 2009
December 21, 2010*

December 20, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you have made yourself known in your Son, Jesus, redeemer of the world. We pray that his birth as a human child will set us free from the old slavery of our sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** Daniel 6:1-28
- Message:** In the 7th Century B.C. King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, and carried off many of its inhabitants. Among them was Daniel, a good and faithful servant of God. While detained in Babylon, Daniel stayed loyal to his God, rather than worship the gods of Babylon. He was able to do so because he believed in the power of his God, whose promises could be trusted. Although we may not be in danger of ending up in a lion's den because of our faith, there are forces that seek to pull us away from faithfulness as well. It is only when God sustains us in faith, through the support of the Holy Spirit, that we are enabled to remain true to our God.
- Discussion:** When has God's support enabled you to remain faithful in a difficult situation?
- Closing Prayer:** Gracious Lord, the trials and dangers of our lives surround us like hungry lions. Strengthen our faith, and sustain our resolve that, like Daniel, we may remain true to you until the end. This we pray in the name of the One who died for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
- Symbol:** A den of lions is a reminder to us of the danger that Daniel faced, but which could not sway him from his trust in God.

The Fourth Wednesday in Advent

*December 23, 2009
December 22, 2010*

December 21, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you have made yourself known in your Son, Jesus, redeemer of the world. We pray that his birth as a human child will set us free from the old slavery of our sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** Isaiah 9:2-7
- Message:** The story is told of a tour guide who was bringing a group of tourists into a deep, dark cave. At one point, the guide reached over and switched off the lights. The people were engulfed by darkness. After a few moments, as the people became uncomfortable, the guide lit one small match, and it seemed as if the whole cavern was filled with light. Perhaps Isaiah once had a similar experience and knew the power of light in the midst of darkness. He described the coming of the Messiah in just such a way. Into the darkness of Israel would come a great light. We have had similar experiences. In the particularly dark experiences of our lives the light of Christ shines most powerfully. Our God is one who desires to be with us in our times of darkness: strengthening us, comforting us, and loving us.
- Discussion:** When have you felt the light of Christ in a dark time of your life? How has God's presence comforted you in a very necessary time?
- Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, in this Advent time we wait for the return of our Lord. Yet we wait for what is present – the light of Christ that is already in our lives. Help us to wait in faith and hope, knowing he comes to save all believers. We pray through that same Jesus Christ. Amen.
- Symbol:** A candle, shining out into the darkness, could remind us of the light that the Messiah would bring to a darkened people.

The Fourth Thursday in Advent

December 23, 2010

December 22, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you have made yourself known in your Son, Jesus, redeemer of the world. We pray that his birth as a human child will set us free from the old slavery of our sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** First Kings 17:1-16
- Message:** God will provide. That is an easy statement to make when the refrigerator is full, the family is healthy, the checkbook has a balance, and the job is going well. When you're starving, and about to eat what you think is your last meal, it is a tougher statement to make. Yet the widow of Zarephath did just that. When Elijah asked her to share her last meal with him, she did so – because she had hope. And her hope came from knowing that if God promised to feed her, God would feed her. This widow helps us to see what Advent is all about, because she has the kind of faith that Advent seeks to produce in believers: a faith that holds to God, and looks to the future with hope, even when the present appears very bleak.
- Discussion:** What situation in today's world could you foresee that would cause some to lose hope? How might you imagine your faith being a resource for a time just like that?
- Closing Prayer:** Dear God, you are the hope of all who wait. As we await the coming of Christ, grant us hope and peace, that we might have a full life, living in your presence. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.
- Symbol:** A jar of meal that never runs empty reminds us of the widow who gave of her last provisions, and found that because of her faith, they never ran out.

The Fourth Friday in Advent

December 23, 2011

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you have made yourself known in your Son, Jesus, redeemer of the world. We pray that his birth as a human child will set us free from the old slavery of our sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** Psalm 119:105-112
- Message:** In this portion of Psalm 119, the Psalmist describes a situation to which many of us can relate. The world around us is wicked, and intent on leading this faithful one astray. They have dedicated themselves to consumption and celebration, with no regard to God's desires for them. They do their best to draw the writer away from God, and into their merry band. But the Psalmist resists. Choosing instead to focus on God's Word, and the testimonies of faith that have been passed down from generation to generation, these evils ones are resisted, and a faithful course through life is set. Many things may have changed since them, but the pressure to "go the world's way" is no less today than it has ever been.
- Discussion:** What pressures in your life draw you away from God? How are the resources of Scriptures a way for you to resist those pressures?
- Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, you have given us your Word as a light to our paths. Help us to honor and respect your Word, and use it to teach us, comfort us, and strengthen us in faith. We pray through the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
- Symbol:** A lamp, shining forward and illumination a hiking trail or a darkened street reminds us that God's Word can illuminate our path through life, helping us not to stumble, and giving us direction.

The Fourth Saturday in Advent

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you have made yourself known in your Son, Jesus, redeemer of the world. We pray that his birth as a human child will set us free from the old slavery of our sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** Second Kings 2:1-15
- Message:** There is one thing unique about the great prophet Elijah: he never died. Unlike most of the Biblical characters, he was taken up to God, carried by chariots of fire. Because of that, the people of Israel expected him to return one day to administer again among God's people. Consequently, many in Jesus' day wondered whether he (or St. John, the Baptizer) was Elijah, returned again to life. Of course, Jesus is the one other whose life's story in the Bible didn't end with death. It ended instead with a resurrection from death, and his ascension into heaven. He too is one that God's people expect will return again – this time to bring an end to the world as we know it. In this season, we have attempted to prepare for his coming by growing in faith.
- Discussion:** Do you feel prepared for Christ's return? How is the thought of his return good news for you?
- Closing Prayer:** Good Lord, as Elijah was carried up to heaven at the end of his earthly days, so too was our Lord, Jesus, the Christ. As we await his return, strengthen us in faith, hope and love, that by living as disciples, we might prepare ourselves for him. We pray in the name of that same Jesus, the Christ. Amen.
- Symbol:** Chariots of fire are a reminder of the day when one of the greatest prophets of all time was carried to his home with God.

Christmas Eve

December 24

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you made this holy night shine with the brightness of the true Light. Grant that here on earth we may walk in the Light of Jesus' presence and in the last day wake to the brightness of his glory; through your only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen
- Scripture:** St. John 1:1-14
- Message:** "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth..." For years, the people of God waited for this event to take place: the birth of the Savior. For days, we have been waiting for this wonderful night. Now we hear the words: "Christ the Savior is born!" And indeed he is – in a manger in Bethlehem, amidst the commotion of a busy Inn" stable – and he is born in our hearts today, as God's grace touches us through the Gospel. In many homes, tonight will be a night of receiving gifts. But the greatest gift has already been received: the gift of Christ, born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, crucified in Jerusalem, and raised from the dead that salvation might be ours. In the story of this one's life is the story of a God who loves us dearly, and wishes to be reconciled to us.
- Discussion:** Have you heard that story? Has it touched your heart? Does the Living Word have a place in your life?
- Closing Prayer:** Dear God, tonight we remember the greatest gift ever given: your willingness to be born, live, and die in our midst, that we might be given salvation. Be born in us today, O Lord. And remain with us always. This we pray in the name of the Newborn Savior. Amen.
- Symbol:** An image of a manger, superimposed on a Bible, could remind us that Jesus of Nazareth, who was born in a Bethlehem manger, was "the Word {that} became flesh."

Christmas Day

December 25

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you have made yourself known in your Son, Jesus, redeemer of the world. We pray that his birth as a human child will set us free from the old slavery of our sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen
- Scripture:** St. Luke 2:1-20
- Message:** A young girl. Her Husband-to-be. A baby laying in a feeding trough. Some ragged looking shepherds. The rustling and breathing of animals in their stables. Such are hardly the surroundings one would expect for a King. Most Kings are born in palaces. Most kings are robed in purple. Most Kings are surrounded by Princes and waiters And servants. But Jesus is a King like no other. His rule is in our hearts and our lives. His rule is one of justice, and peace, and reconciliation, and love. His rule is expressed by taking on the role of a servant. It is this King that we honor today. And how can we best honor him? With a believing heart and a willing life. As you celebrate the birth of the Savior today, may this powerful example of God's love for you move you to faith, and enable you to live a life of loving service.
- Discussion:** How is the rule of Jesus' different from the rule of earthly kings? In what ways have you tried to be a servant of this *different* King?
- Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, thank you for loving us enough to become one of us. Grant that the message of this day might stay with us in the weeks ahead, that we might remain aware of your love for us, the forgiveness you offer us, and your presence with us. We pray in the name of the one who was born in Bethlehem, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.
- Symbol:** A manger scene, with Jesus, Mary, Joseph, some shepherds and a variety of animals reminds us of the place where Jesus was born.

The Second Day of Christmas

December 26

- Opening Prayer:** Grant us grace, O Lord, that like Stephen we may learn to love even our enemies and seek forgiveness for those who desire our hurt; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen
- Scripture:** Acts 6:1-8, 7:54-8:2 (or Acts 6:1-8:2)
- Message:** St. Stephen is widely regarded as the first martyr; the first to be killed because of his witness to the faith. He is remembered by the church every year on this date, December 26th. It is a quick movement, for those of us who just yesterday celebrated the birth of the Christ Child, to be thinking of one who paid with his life to be a follower. But it is an important one. This Christ was no innocent, naïve religious figure. He was one who would do battle with the powers of his day. He was a revolutionary who would turn the church upside down, in order to welcome new believers into God's family. To follow this Christ was no easy task. Many would pay dearly for the privilege. Stephen was one of these – a man so deeply touched by Christ, that he would follow him no matter what the personal cost.
- Discussion:** How do you celebrate the ways in which Christ has been born anew in your life? By what means do you strive to communicate this to others?
- Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, as you moved in the life of St. Stephen, so move in our lives today. Touch us with your love, and move us to faith. Give us the courage and strength to witness to you, even in difficult circumstances. This we pray in the name of Jesus, the Christ. Amen
- Symbol:** A man, surrounded by an angry crowd – or a stone, could remind us of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

The Third Day of Christmas

December 27

- Opening Prayer:** Merciful Lord, let the brightness of your light shine on your Church, so that all of us, instructed by the teachings of John, your apostle and evangelist, may walk in the light of your truth and attain eternal life; we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son. Amen
- Scripture:** St. John 21:20-25
- Message:** *The disciple whom Jesus loved.* Much has been written about this individual. Who was he? What was he like? Why was he singled out as "the disciple whom Jesus loved?" Mystery surrounds him, but tradition has it that he was the author of the Gospel according to St. John. The Christ who had been born in Bethlehem grew up to be the man who touched the lives of many – and among them was St. John. He was so moved by the relationship that he recorded a number of the events that took place when he was with Jesus, so that others might come to believe in God's message of salvation through faith in this Christ. Now our lives have been touched by the reading of his book. We too know the Christ, because of the disciple who was moved enough by his experience with Jesus to preserve it for future generations.
- Discussion:** What experiences have you had with Jesus, the Christ? How might you pass them on to future generations?
- Closing Prayer:** Good Lord, St. John was touched deeply by the time he spent with Jesus, your Son. Touch us as well, that like St. John, we too might seek to share our experience with others. We pray in the name of that same Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.
- Symbol:** A man at a writing desk could remind us of St. John, the author of the fourth Gospel.

The Fourth Day of Christmas

December 28

- Opening Prayer:** We remember today, O God, the slaughter of the holy innocents of Bethlehem by order of King Herod. Receive, we pray, into the arms of your mercy all innocent victims, and by your great might frustrate the designs of evil tyrants and establish your rule of justice, love, and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.
- Scripture:** St. Matthew 2:1-18
- Message:** We like to forget this part of the story. It is disturbing. It is hard to think about the innocent death of so many babies, and the suffering that their parents must have experienced. Yet it is part of the Christmas story. And it precludes us, like the account of St. Stephen's death, from becoming overly sentimental as we celebrate this Christmas season. We celebrate because Jesus, the Christ, the Newborn King is indeed the King of all kings. This is a message that cuts like a two edged sword. For those who believe, it is good news – great news of comfort and joy. But for those who believe in themselves, and in their own power, it is terrible news. And, like Herod, they will go to all lengths to escape the implications of his message: they choose to be their own king!
- Discussion:** How do you resist the kinship of Jesus in your own life? Over what elements of living do you want complete control? Through prayer and meditation, which of those will you begin to give over to God?
- Closing Prayer:** Dear God, like Herod, we too resist your rule in our lives. Help us to overcome our fear of trusting you. And grant that we might come to rely on you in all matters. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.
- Symbol:** Mothers weeping, or the souls of children soaring to heaven might remind us of the terrible reaction of Herod to the news of Jesus' birth.

The Fifth Day of Christmas

December 29

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you have made yourself known in your Son, Jesus, redeemer of the world. We pray that his birth as a human child will set us free from the old slavery of our sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** St. Luke 2:22-40
- Message:** *Nunc Dimittis* – the first words in the Latin rendering of Luke 2:29. Simeon was a man of faith, filled with the Holy Spirit, who lived in Jerusalem when Jesus was born, and was waiting for the Messiah. Simeon once had a vision that he would not die before seeing the Messiah. This vision became the focal point of his life. He spent days praying, and meditating on the Scriptures, and hoping for the time when that vision would be fulfilled. Then it happened: a young couple from Nazareth showed up in Jerusalem to have their child dedicated in the temple. And the moment Simeon laid eyes on them he knew who they were. His joy was so great that he cried out, *Nunc Dimittis*, "Now I can die in peace, because I have seen the Messiah."
- Discussion:** Both Simeon and Anna were filled with joy at seeing Jesus, because they knew he was the Christ. How does your faith bring you joy? How are you celebrating that joy during this Christmas season?
- Closing Prayer:** Lord God, St. Luke remembers for us the joy that Anna and Simeon felt when they met Jesus. Help us to experience that same joy, and bless us as we seek to celebrate that joy in this Christmas season. We pray in the name of the Newborn Savior. Amen.
- Symbol:** A figure with hands upraised can remind us of both Simeon and Anna, who delighted in knowing that Jesus was God's Messiah.

The Sixth Day of Christmas

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you have made yourself known in your Son, Jesus, redeemer of the world. We pray that his birth as a human child will set us free from the old slavery of our sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** St. Luke 2:41-52
- Message:** Little is known about Jesus' childhood. His family, his home, his friends, his early experiences; all of this has been lost to history. But we do have one story, remembered in today's passage from St. Luke. It leaves us with a powerful image; that of a 12 year old Jesus, sitting among the scholars in Jerusalem, talking with them about the faith, and probing their understanding with deep questions. This scene is a glimpse of what is to come; a hint of what his adult ministry would be like. It is with probing questions that the young boy Jesus caused the elders in Jerusalem to stop and think. And it was with probing questions that he approached others: "Will you follow me?" "Are you willing to be a neighbor?" "Which of you is without sin?" "Will you give drink to the thirsty?" "Can you sell all that you have?" He helped them see who they were, and understand their need for forgiveness.
- Discussion:** What questions do the stories of Jesus Christ ask of you? How does knowing who you truly are better prepare you to hear the Gospel?
- Closing Prayer:** Lord God, you know our innermost thoughts – yet you love us anyway. Help us see our need for forgiveness and renewal, and give us the strength to desire it. We pray in the name of your Son. Amen.
- Symbol:** A question mark, or the image of a young boy in the midst of his elders, reminds us of the ministry of Jesus.

The Seventh Day of Christmas

- Opening Prayer:** Eternal Father, you have placed us in a world of space and time, and through the events of our lives you bless us with your love. Grant that in this new year we may know your presence, see your love at work, and live in the light of the event which gives us joy forever – the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
- Scripture:** St. Luke 13:6-9
- Message:** *New Year's Eve.* A time of remembering the year past, celebrating the new beginning of another January 1st, and, of course, making resolutions for the year to come. In a sense, this time of year is a paradigm for the message of salvation that God offers to us through faith. Hearing the Good News of Jesus Christ is like a "New Year's Experience." We are invited to forget the past, rest assured that it has been forgiven, and start anew with a clean slate. How else might we better respond to that gracious gift than by resolving to be more faithful the next time around? This is the life of faith: a life in which our patient God helps us to grow into being followers of our Lord.
- Discussion:** What new works do you suspect God may be trying to effect in your life? How can you open yourself up to the movement of God's spirit, so that they might take place?
- Closing Prayer:** God, you are always ready to hear our confession and forgive our sins. Help us to put this past year behind us. Grant us the ability to feel forgiven for that which we have done. And carry us forward into this new year. We pray in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.
- Symbol:** A clock, a calendar, or a baby wearing a banner with this year's number on it can remind us of the newness of the coming day, and the opportunities for faithfulness that it presents.

The Eighth Day of Christmas

January 1

- Opening Prayer:** Eternal Father, you have placed us in a world of space and time, and through the events of our lives you bless us with your love. Grant that in this new year we may know your presence, see your love at work, and live in the light of the event which gives us joy forever – the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
- Scripture:** Psalm 98:1-9
- Message:** *Sing a new song unto the Lord. Let your song be sung from mountain high.* These words speak of a God who is constantly creating in this world so that we might discover fresh new examples of the Creator in our midst. They speak of a God who calls us to discover new ways to live lives of praise and faithfulness. They speak of a life of faith that is ever growing, ever changing, ever living, ever powerful. This is the kind of faith that occurs when believers live in relationship with the living Christ. As we make room for Christ in our relationships, our decisions, our priorities, God makes us and molds us into ever new creatures, possessed by a faith that gives us new life.
- Discussion:** How has your relationship with God in Jesus Christ brought newness to your living? Why is your faith a source a joy for you? How will you express that in new ways during the coming year?
- Closing Prayer:** Good Lord, at the beginning of this new year, we thank you for the many ways that you have blessed our lives. Thank you for making all things new, and help us to continually “sing new songs” to you, as we respond to your grace. We pray in the name of your dear Son, Amen.
- Symbol:** A chicken breaking out of an egg, the sun rising; these and many other images can remind us of the newness that God wishes for us.

The Ninth Day of Christmas

January 2

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you have made yourself known in your Son, Jesus, redeemer of the world. We pray that his birth as a human child will set us free from the old slavery of our sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** St. Matthew 4:18-25
- Message:** *I will make you fishers of men, if you follow me.* It isn't easy to imagine what Peter, Andrew, James and John must have thought when Jesus first asked them to drop their nets and follow him. After all, they had responsibilities: to their jobs, to Zebedee (James' and John's father), to their families. But follow him, they did. And life would never be the same. They saw sights they couldn't forget. They heard teachings that changed their lives. And eventually they responded to challenges that they couldn't possible have imagined. Such is the life of faith. We don't know where it will lead us. We don't know what hurdles it will present. But we do know that we won't go alone. The one who has asked us to follow is always there, ready to guide us and strengthen us and comfort us.
- Discussion:** How has God's call come to you? In what ministry do you feel led to participate? What will you have to give up to do so?
- Closing Prayer:** Dear God, you call us to follow you, and we ask for the strength to obey your call. Help us to be “fishers of men.” And assure us that your Spirit might be with us, blessing and increasing our efforts. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, your son, our Lord. Amen.
- Symbol:** Men in a boat, speaking to a man on shore can remind us of the day when Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John to follow him.

The Tenth Day of Christmas

January 3

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you have made yourself known in your Son, Jesus, redeemer of the world. We pray that his birth as a human child will set us free from the old slavery of our sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
- Scripture:** Acts 7:54-8:1 and 9:1-19
- Message:** Preserve the Word of God: That's all Saul was trying to do. He was a trained Hebrew scholar – he knew the Scriptures inside and out. He waited longingly for the coming Messiah, and for the day when God would rule the world. He knew that day would come, and sought to prepare himself for it. But he was absolutely infuriated with those people who claimed that the teacher Jesus, that simple man from Nazareth, was God's Messiah. Saul attempted, with all of his strength, to oppose that blasphemy. That is, until one day on the road to Damascus. A bolt of lightning flashed near him, he fell off his horse, he heard a voice, and was unable to see for three days. God had touched Saul's life. And Paul (as Saul was later known) would respond for the rest of his life.
- Discussion:** Saul was a believer in God, but until his experience with the risen Jesus, he was blind to the truth. How has God sought to help you see the truth? What events in your life have helped to make you faithful?
- Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, as you broke into Saul's life, so break into ours. Move us to faith. Call us into ministry. And strengthen us for the task. This we pray in the name of Jesus, who has power to change lives. Amen.
- Symbol:** A horse, a man on the ground, and a bolt of lightning remind us of the conversion of Saul, who became an apostle of the Lord.

The Eleventh Day of Christmas

January 4

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you have made yourself known in your Son, Jesus, redeemer of the world. We pray that his birth as a human child will set us free from the slavery of our sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** St. Luke 19:1-10
- Message:** *Zacchaeus was a wee little man. A wee little man was he.* So goes the Sunday School song. The story of Zacchaeus and his meeting with Jesus holds a powerful truth. Zacchaeus, a renowned "sinner" in Jericho, was one of the many who saw Jesus pass through that day. But he was one whose life was changed because of the meeting. When Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus into his home, he also welcomed him into his heart. Moved by Jesus' willingness to meet with him, even though he didn't deserve it, Zacchaeus resolved to repent of his evil business practices, and make restitution for any wrong he had done. The presence of Jesus in the life of this "chief of tax collectors" was enough to move him from sinful deceit to loving concern.
- Discussion:** What wrongs have you committed that that haven't yet been resolved? Do you feel forgiven by God for those wrongs? If so, how might you reach out in love to the ones who have been wronged?
- Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, as you touched Zacchaeus and moved him to faith, so touch us and move us to faith. Allow the light of Christ to shine in our lives, as we may continually celebrate his birth by reaching out to neighbors in need. This we pray in the name of the Christ. Amen.
- Symbol:** The image of a man in a tree can remind us of the day when Zacchaeus climbed a tree in order to see Jesus.

The Twelfth Day of Christmas

January 5

- Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, you have made yourself known in your Son, Jesus, redeemer of the world. We pray that his birth as a human child will set us free from the slavery of our sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
- Scripture:** St. Matthew 2:1-12
- Message:** *On the 12th Day of Christmas, my true love gave to me...* Today (the last day of Christmas) and tomorrow (the first day of Epiphany) we will read of travelers from the east who came, bearing gifts for the Christ Child. They help us to remember that the birth of the Savior in our midst is a gift to celebrate: not just for a few hours or for a day or two, for an entire season – and, really, for an entire lifetime!
- Discussion:** How has celebrating the season of Christmas for twelve full days helped to emphasize what a gift the Gospel message is to you? How will you attempt to share that gift with others?
- Closing Prayer:** Lord God, you have given us the greatest gift of all: the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to cherish that gift always. Amen.
- Symbol:** A package, wrapped and decorated with ribbons and bows can remind us of God's gift to us: coming to us in the person of Jesus, the Christ.

The Epiphany of our Lord

January 6

- Opening Prayer:** Lord God, on this day you revealed your Son to the nations by the leading of a star. Lead us now by faith to know your presence in our lives, and bring us at last to the full vision of your glory, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God
- Scripture:** St. Matthew 2:1-12
- Message:** It is interesting to note the response that people had to the birth of the Messiah. One would expect God's faithful, the Hebrews, to be the first to embrace him, and celebrate that their hopes and dreams had come to pass. But that wasn't to be. Herod, who was reigning in Jerusalem, was threatened by this Newborn King, and sought to put him to death. He is the first example of how Jesus' own people would reject him time and time again. And look who are among the first to worship him: wise men from the east – Gentiles – members of a race that God's people had long considered to be "unclean." These are the ones who first came to our Lord, and the pattern would stick for most of Jesus' life. Time and time again, when God's own people rejected his message, others who were not part of God's family would receive it. This ministry, begun in Jesus' life, continues today.
- Discussion:** How have you sought to share the faith with one who is on the "outside" recently?
- Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, your Son's ministry was one of bringing more and more new people into your family. Help us to continue that ministry, that your Word might be spread across the face of our world. Amen.
- Symbol:** Three wise men from the east, gathered around the manger, are a reminder to us of those first ones who came to worship Jesus.

Appendix A: The Jesse Tree; *A resource for observing Advent*

*O come, strong Branch of Jesse, free
Your own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell your people save
And give them victory over the grave.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.*

Lutheran Book of Worship, Hymn #34

Many people enjoy the custom of having an evergreen tree, decorating it with Christmas ornaments and decorations, and displaying it in their homes during December. But to do so runs counter to the way the Christian Church has traditionally understood the season of Advent. If Advent is a time of waiting and preparing, how can we enjoy decorating our homes without doing injustice to the season?

One solution might be to create a *Jesse Tree*: a tree decorated not with Christmas ornaments and decorations, but with symbols reminding us of Old Testament stories – stories that Jesus learned when he was a child. One way to make use of a Jesse Tree in your home is to use the following schedule.

- December 1 Begin daily devotions in your home, creating an ornament or decoration for the Jesse Tree at the close of each time of devotion.
- December 15 (or so...) Erect an evergreen tree (natural or artificial) in your home, decorating it with the ornaments and decorations you have made so far, or with those you may have kept from previous years.
- December 23 (or December 24) Hold a home worship service. Take down the Jesse Tree ornaments and decorations, and replace them with Christmas ornaments and decorations. When all the Christmas ornaments and decorations have been placed on the tree, then place gifts under the tree as a reminder of God's gift to the world: Jesus Christ.
- December 25 – January 5 Celebrate the season of Christmas during each of its twelve days by hanging the number of that day on the tree, sharing a small gift with one another (or with a different member of the household each day), and reading together the Christmas devotion in this book assigned for that day.
- January 6 On *The Epiphany of our Lord*, bring your Christmas celebration to a close by removing the ornaments and decorations from the tree, and taking the tree down.

Making a Jesse Tree part of your tradition provides three distinct benefits. First, it helps you to experience an Advent season of waiting and preparing for the Christmas event. Second, it helps you to carve out a daily time of devotion and meditation in your home. And third, it provides a natural and non-threatening opportunity to witness, as visitors to your home are likely to ask you about your tree.

The devotions in this book are intended to support the use of a Jesse Tree in the home. Each day recalls an individual or an event from the history of God's people, and for each of them there is a symbol. You are encouraged to make your own version of this symbol out of cardboard, construction paper, or any other craft materials you may have, and hang it on your Jesse Tree.

Some people may choose to create Jesse Tree ornaments and decorations that are permanent, and intended to be used year after year. Others may choose to create new ones each year. Yet others may choose to use a combination of the two. Feel free to develop your own traditions regarding the Jesse Tree. This guide is intended to be just that: a guide. Use it in whatever way best suits your situation.

Appendix B: Saint Nicholas; *A model of alternative giving*

According to a very old legend, about 300 years after the birth of Christ a child was born to a poor family in Turkey. His family didn't have much, but they always shared with others. When he was only a teenager he joined a monastery and became a priest.

While he was in the monastery he learned of a poor family who lived in the village nearby. The family didn't have enough money to afford dowries for their teenage daughters, so the daughters couldn't be married. In those days, unmarried women might starve to death or be sold into slavery.

When the young man heard about this family, he decided to do something. In the dark of night he took a bag of gold – enough for the dowry of the oldest daughter – and went to the family's house. He didn't want them to know who had given the gift, so he threw the bag of gold through an opening in their roof (a "chimney" used for heating and cooking). On the following two nights he tossed two more bags through the hole so that the other two daughters would have dowries and could also marry. There are other legends about this man. Most are stories about how he cared for children or people in need. In time he was called "a saint." Oh, by the way, his name was Nicholas.

That's right: Saint Nicholas. The one whom we've come to call *Santa Claus*. Quite a difference, isn't there, between the jolly, red-clad man who sits in malls, a symbol of good fortune (*the more you have the more you get...*) and the man who made sure that a poor family gained the means to allow their daughters to be married (*the less you have, the more you get...*)? It's a shame that we've thrown Saint Nicholas out of our celebrations, and embraced *Santa Claus* with such gusto.

It's not such a bad idea, you know: the energy that Saint Nicholas put into caring for those in need was a concrete effort to imitate the ministry of Jesus, and thus celebrate the birth of Christ. There were many imitators of Saint Nicholas in the early days. Perhaps it would be wise to introduce ourselves and our children to Saint Nicholas and let his giving spirit to be a part of our own Christmas these days as well – not just by telling the story, but by living it out in our own celebrations.

How might that happen? Well, we might forgo some of the "extra" presents that we give to each other, and instead:

- ✦ clean out the closets, and give those items that are still in decent condition to an organization that cares for the less fortunate in our community: Lutheran Family Services, Lutheran Refugee Services, Covenant Cupboard, Salvation Army, a homeless shelter, the Association for Retarded Citizens...
- ✦ take the whole family to a downtown food line during the Christmas week and help serve food.
- ✦ donate 25% (or some other percentage) of what is spent on Christmas gifts to the Lutheran World Hunger Appeal, to be used for developmental work and disaster relief throughout the world.
- ✦ give the gift of time: volunteer to work at a food bank or relief organization, spend time with family members or significant friends, pray for friends and family on a daily basis...
- ✦ make your own gifts, rather than purchasing consumer goods, and make a charitable gift of the money you may have otherwise spent.
- ✦ send home-made Christmas cards, colored by family members.
- ✦ give an old toy (or other item) away for every new toy (or other item) that is received.

In these and other ways, we can allow the caring and sharing attitude of Saint Nicholas to be alive in our own family's Christmas traditions.

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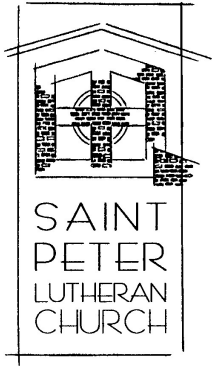
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SUNDAY MORNING SCHEDULE

September – May

8:30 a.m. Traditional Communion Service
9:40 a.m. Youth & Adult Education
10:45 a.m. Contemporary Communion Service

June – August

8:30 a.m. Outdoors Communion Service
10:00 a.m. Indoors Communion Service

MID-WEEK ADVENT AND LENT WORSHIP SCHEDULE

Wednesdays

7:00 p.m. Evening Prayer (preceded by a light supper during Lent)

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Our Mission Statement

We Are Welcomed into God's Love
just as we are

We Are Sent into God's World
to be a reflection of Christ's love

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... God proves love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. [Romans 5:1, 8]

Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." [St. Matthew 28:19-20]