



GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN CANADA

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 18, 2022

Tree of Life

Today Isaiah prophesies that a young woman will bear a son and name him Emmanuel. The gospel is Matthew's account of the annunciation and birth of the one named Emmanuel, God-with-us. During these final days of Advent we pray, "O come, O come, Emmanuel," a beloved hymn based on the O Antiphons, ancient prayers appointed for the seven days preceding Christmas. On this final Sunday of Advent we prepare to celebrate the birth of the one born to save us from the power of sin and death.

A warm welcome to those who are here worshipping in-person and on-line with us today! Here at Grace Lutheran we believe God is active in your life. Even you being here now is testament of God's calling and leading in your heart, which you have faithfully heeded. So we welcome you, and pray that today you will be nurtured and that the gifts that God has graciously given you will be stirred for the sake of God's mission in the world.

Grace Lutheran worships, prays, and serves on the traditional and unceded lands and territories of the hən̓q̓əmiñəm̓ (Musqueam) and Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish) peoples.

GATHERING

CALL TO WORSHIP AND LIGHTING OF ADVENT WREATH:

We gather in the name of God our Shepherd, who shines forth in the world, stirring up strength and helping us in our weakness. For this Shepherd restores us, the Lord of hosts saves us, our God shines upon us and brings us back into wholeness.

And in our worship we light the candles on this wreath, this wheel of time that marks our days of preparation of Christ's advent. May our eyes be opened to see God's presence among us, that we might be enlightened by grace, empowered by love, and strengthened by Jesus, the Word made flesh.

Light One Candle to Watch for Messiah (#240)

Grant this through Christ our Lord, O God, whose coming is certain and whose day draws near.
Amen. Thanks be to God.

GATHERING HYMN: Peace Came to Earth (#285)

GREETING

The strengthening grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the emboldening love of God, and the peace of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

And also with you.

HYMN OF PRAISE (p. 6)

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of power and grace, you come to us in surprising ways: through creation, through community, through the resurrection of the dead. Show us the face of Immanuel in our time, that we be brought out of fear and into awe of your love and mercy, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. **Amen.**

WORD

FIRST READING: Isaiah 7:10-16

A reading from Isaiah.

An Israelite and Aramean military coalition presented a serious threat to King Ahaz of Judah. In response, Ahaz decided to secure his throne and kingdom by seeking Assyrian help. Isaiah reminds Ahaz that human attempts to establish security will fail. The prophet gives the sign that is the only source of true safety: Immanuel, God is with us!

¹⁰The LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted."

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

PSALM: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

¹Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock;
shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.

²**In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh,
stir up your strength and come to help us.**

³Restore us, O God;
let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved.

⁴**O LORD God of hosts,
how long will your anger fume when your people pray?**

⁵You have fed them with the bread of tears;
you have given them bowls of tears to drink.

⁶**You have made us the derision of our neighbors,
and our enemies laugh us to scorn.**

⁷Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved.

¹⁷**Let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one you have made so strong for yourself.**

¹⁸And so will we never turn away from you;
give us life, that we may call upon your name.

¹⁹**Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;
let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved.**

SECOND READING: Romans 1:1-7

A reading from Romans.

Most of the Christians in Rome do not know Paul. In this letter's opening he introduces himself as an apostle divinely appointed to spread God's gospel. The gospel's content is the promised coming of Christ, and Paul's mission is to bring about the obedience of faith among all nations, including his Roman audience.

¹Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ²which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, ³the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, ⁶including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

⁷To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION (p. 10)

GOSPEL: Matthew 1:18-25

The holy gospel according to Matthew.

Glory to you, O Lord.

Matthew's story of Jesus' birth focuses on the role of Joseph, who adopts the divinely-begotten child into the family of David and obediently gives him the name Jesus, which means "God saves."

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"
which means, "God is with us."²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

SERMON

As your Spirit spoke to Mary and Joseph, O God, may your Spirit speak to us, fill us with your truth and the confidence in your promises, and bring us all into peace, through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

There are a lot of fears in the world, aren't there? At least, I feel like there are a lot of things that I'm afraid of. It doesn't help that my parents came to Canada during a very different time in our history and thus instilled in their children a real suspicion of people, which probably developed into some sort of general paranoia. But the fears that I face aren't really your typical ones, like I'm not afraid of roller coasters like my wife is, I'm not afraid of loud noises like my kids are, and I'm not afraid of driving in the snow like my mother-in-law is. I'm not saying that I'm super brave or anything, but just that these particular things aren't that scary to me.

But there are other fears that I have that might not be shared by everyone, but oh boy can they be debilitating. Like I'm afraid of being alone, I'm scared of failing or being labelled a failure, and I have a real fear of just not being good enough and not living up to the expectation that's put on me. You'd know all this if you've been paying attention in my sermons, I'm pretty open about it as it's been something that has really plagued me since I was young.

I can't even tell you how many times I've avoided various gatherings, projects, or even just talking to someone because of these fears. Like I don't often go to social events when I'm not 100% sure that I'll already know someone there because I don't want to be there alone. I try not to take on any task that is too big for the real possibility that I'll fail at it. I don't often put myself out there because I'm really afraid of just not being good enough and people would

scoff and be like, “what a putz.” Interestingly enough, these are the three fears that kept me from going to seminary all those years ago, fears that I was eventually able to temporarily put aside to go and be shaped to be this exemplary pastor that you see before you today. But it really was only temporary as those fears kept creeping up in the other areas of my life.

You know, there’s a saying, “we have nothing to fear but fear itself.” Which is totally true, because I’m afraid of fear as well. But fear, in the speech that made this saying popular by President Roosevelt, is defined as “nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes...” and that’s where I scratch my head a little, because I wouldn’t say my fears are nameless, I mean I know what they are and like I said I’m pretty open about them. I wouldn’t say they’re unreasonable, as those things that I’m afraid of pretty scary, almost like they’re designed specifically to instill fear... so mission accomplished *thumbup*. Also, I definitely wouldn’t say that my fears are unjustified, they’re totally justified because I hate being alone, I hate failing, and I hate it when I feel like I’m not good enough. That sounds pretty justifiable to me.

And so maybe what I need when times get tough and these fears creep up and begin their debilitating work on my psyche, is for an angel to come and tell me not to be afraid, like how one came to Joseph in a dream during his difficult time. Poor Joseph here has a lot to be afraid of as well, his betrothed is found to be with child possibly before they’ve even met, his reputation as a husband and a God-fearing Jew could be on the line, and he’s having these inexplicable delusional dreams of angels telling him what to do.

I wonder what this must have been like for Joseph.

“Do not be afraid” Joseph is told. But that is easier said than done, nameless apparition that came in a dream at one of the worst points of life thus far.

“Do not be afraid” it says. Perhaps it’d be better for this so-called angel to act as a guardian and take away all the things that we have to be afraid of, maybe?

“Do not be afraid.” These words don’t really come as a comfort whatsoever, because it’s not like we can just turn off our fears without any kind of assurances that we needn’t be afraid anymore.

And maybe this angel knew this. Maybe this messenger sent by God was aware of Joseph’s fears and knew what to do and say in order to quell them. Maybe this angel entered Joseph’s life at this very fearful time, and brought words of assurance and peace.

This angel tells Joseph, not in so many words, that his fears are but human fears. Things are not as they seem. Through all this confusion, anxiety, and uncertainty, God is with us, even in this illegitimate child that threatens to change Joseph’s life forever, as this baby literally is God with us.

But it’s still tough, isn’t it? It’s still scary stuff. It’s still easier said than done, because we don’t know what the future holds. We don’t know what might happen. We don’t know what people will say about us or how we’ll feel about ourselves even. We don’t know how our fears would be realised.

So I’m guessing that Joseph was still really scared. I mean I know I would be. This whole raising this child who will change the world is really the culmination of all those fears that I mentioned

that I have. But somehow Joseph goes through with it anyway. He steps up. In spite of the debilitating fears, Joseph answers God's call and acts out of faith.

Then the question isn't so much what fears are present, but how we can act even within those fears. It's not about whether or not we can get past our fears, but how much we might recognise God with us in the midst of them. It isn't that the fears need to be taken away to allow us to function, but the amount of peace we receive in spite of them.

And thanks be to God, we are given peace in abundance, so much so that it surpasses all understanding.

So yes, I admit that I'm still afraid of all those things that I mentioned earlier. I admit that I still find them debilitating and times and I avoid situations where I may have to face them. I admit that the call to "be not afraid" falls on totally deaf ears on my part. But our courage doesn't lie in those fears being lifted. Our boldness isn't in our enemies be smote or the things we're afraid of being destroyed. Our hope doesn't depend so much on us not being afraid, but in the peace found in God's promises, reminding us that nothing can remove us from God's kingdom, community, and love.

And I don't know what can remind us of the promise of God with us more than a living, tangible, human being, one that shows us love, care, and companionship. This doesn't have to be the actual Christ child in our case like it was for Joseph, but it could be our own children, our parents, our spouses, siblings, or friends. It could even be members of our church community both here in this place and beyond.

So I've learned that even when I'm not with anyone that I know, I'm not actually alone. I've come to see that even when I feel like a failure, it does not forfeit me from God's promises to me and all people. I've been moved to accept the fact that when it seems like I'm not good enough, God's grace and love continues to be given to me and all of you, reminding me that I'm recreated and reformed to be good enough and a very welcome part of God's family and the body of Christ.

This is true for all of us, that while we might all have different fears that hold us back, God fills us with the peace in knowing that there is nothing that has ever been created that can snatch us from the hand of God, the one that holds us all dear and lifts us up out of our ailments and brings us into joy and hope of God's unending and abundant love shared with all people for all time, declaring us as God's children.

So as we come to the end of this season of Advent, may we continue in our hope of peace, that we might be lifted out of our fears and brought into the love and joy of the Christ child that has come to us as one of us, welcoming us as siblings together moving and acting for the sake of the good news of God's promises in the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.

HYMN OF THE DAY: Love Divine, All Loves Excelling (#631)

CREED (p. 12)

Together emboldened with the whole church, let us confess the Christian faith with the Apostle's Creed:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.*
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Called out of fear and into the peace of Christ, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need. Each petition will end with "in your restoring mercy, O God," and you are all invited to respond with **hear our prayer**. In your restoring mercy, O God, **hear our prayer**.

God our Shepherd, you lead us with your shining light and you restore us into community. Lift us up out of anxiety and fear, and may our actions and ministry reflect your promises and foster right relationships with all people full of grace. We remember in prayer our neighbouring faith communities; our partner Anglican Church of Canada; our bishop Kathy, assistant to the bishop Rebekah, and national bishop Susan; and our companion congregations of the BC Synod. In particular we pray for Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church in Comox and all the pastors and leaders that serve there; and for our seminaries in Saskatoon and Waterloo, all their faculty, staff, and students. In your restoring mercy, O God, **hear our prayer**.

God of hosts, you shine your face on us through your creation and you restore us in the lands. May we always recognize your love for us through all that you have made, and may our appreciation of this planet move us in faithful stewardship. We pray especially for those living in areas of harsh weather and natural disasters, and may we all be able to navigate the changing weather safely. In your restoring mercy, O God, **hear our prayer**.

God our salvation, we at times feel like we have fallen to the hands of our enemies, but you restore us and bring to us your justice. Teach all world leaders and politicians how to rule with your grace, and we pray especially for the areas of the world that face war, violence, and political turmoil. May we all, by your leading, move toward living in true peace and harmony with all people. We also pray for those that we have sponsored to come to our country: Solyana Amanuel; and Maেকেle Kiflu, Selam Haile, and their children; that they are all able to begin their journey soon. In your restoring mercy, O God, **hear our prayer**.

God our strength, let your healing hand be upon us all and restore us to wholeness. Be with all among us who are ill, who mourn, or who feel lonely, that we all be brought into the

confidence of your promises. Especially we pray for Bryan; Ron, Tess, and Mineko; Bev and family; Laura; Kandie; Thomas; Cindy; William; Chris; Walter; Larry; Piet; and all those we name aloud or quietly in our hearts at this time...

In your restoring mercy, O God, **hear our prayer.**

God of all eternity, you give life to those who call upon you, and you restore us to live with you and all the saints for all time in your kingdom. May the memory of their lives of faith continue to inspire us in all that we do, that our actions and words be pleasing to you. In your restoring mercy, O God, **hear our prayer.**

Into your hands, O God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your empowering love, shown to us all by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

PEACE

The peace of Christ be with you always.

And also with you.

MEAL

DIALOGUE (p. 14)

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

PREFACE

It is indeed right, our duty, and our joy, that we should at all times and places give thanks and praise to you, O God, through our Saviour Jesus Christ, who lifts us up out of fear and worry, and brings us into the confidence of your promises, allowing us to join with all angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, the hosts of heaven and the church on earth in praising your name with this unending hymn:

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY (p. 14)

THANKSGIVING AT THE TABLE

Holy God, holy and mighty, gracious and merciful, eternally loving, you know us as we are and you bring us into your salvation and peace, lifting us up out the uncertainties of life and you make certain the promise of your love. For you have sent to us Jesus, you Son, as one of us to reveal to all the ways of your everlasting truth, redeeming us from our sin and shortcomings and welcoming us to live with you and all the saints as your holy church.

For it was on the night that he was betrayed that your Son Jesus revealed to us all the wonders of your grace by sitting with his friends for a meal, and upon taking some bread and giving thanks, he broke and shared it saying, "Take and eat, this is my body broken for you. Do this for the remembrance of me."

And then after ate, he continued to reveal your love by taking the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them to drink from saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me."

It is by this food and drink that we are reminded of our connection to God and each other, living in love and support of one another, not claiming to fully understand but rather to fully accept this mystery of faith:

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ will come again.

All honour and glory belong to you, O God, for you continue to remain true as you have throughout the ages, showing all people of all places the expanse of your love and grace, and welcoming us all to feast on your love, through Jesus Christ our Shepherd and Saviour, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, as one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

LORD'S PRAYER (p. 17)

Brought together in the confidence of God's promises, let us pray as Jesus taught us.

Our Father in heaven,
 hallowed be your name,
 your kingdom come,
 your will be done,
 on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins
 as we forgive those
 who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial
 and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power,
 and the glory are yours,
 now and forever. Amen.

INVITATION TO COMMUNION

Taste and see God empowering us with love and grace.

Thanks be to God.

COMMUNION

COMMUNION HYMNS: Lamb of God (p. 17)

We Walk by Faith (#635)

The Peace of the Lord (#646)

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

Holy God, again you have fed and nourished us with your Word and love, and strengthened us by the grace of your promises. Continue to work in us through all that we do, that we might be faithful examples of your mercy in all the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

SENDING

BLESSING

May God the Shepherd bless you with salvation and strength,
God our Saviour shine on you and lift you from all doubt and danger,
God the Spirit look upon you with favour and endow you with peace, now and forever.
Amen.

SENDING HYMN: Rise, Shine, You People! (#665)

DISMISSAL

Go in peace, be not afraid but strengthened by the promise of God with us.
Thanks be to God.

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