

**Devotions – December 20-26, 2015**  
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**Sunday, December 20**

Text: Luke 1: 39-55

Verse: *“His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.”*

While I was enjoying breakfast at a local restaurant the waitress came to me with more than the bill. She paused to talk saying she was worried about a friend of hers who suffers from PTSD—Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I asked if her friend had been in the military and had served in combat. She told me no, her friend had been through the pain of domestic abuse.

Memories of past suffering will not simply go away with time. One can hope that people who struggle with PTSD will receive professional mental health counseling. About a month ago in the New York Times, columnist David Brooks wrote about this subject. He spoke of people who were in the military, people who lived through the desperate fear of terrorist attack, and then afterward suffered the nightmare of PTSD. But human beings are more resilient than we often think, Brooks wrote, speaking of people who dealt with their pain to live renewed lives of meaning and joy. Brooks wrote, “As Philip Fisher, a University of Oregon psychology professor, noted in an email, the big background factor that nurtures resilience is unconditional love. The people who survive and rebound from trauma frequently had an early caregiver who pumped unshakable love into them, and that built a rock of inner security they could stand on for the rest of their lives.”

We all need resilience since we are not spared setbacks and suffering. I have often thought of resilience as coming from one’s own store of strength and courage. The discipline of psychology is saying something more is needed, a firm foundation of steadfast love.

As the festival of our Savior’s birth nears, we are reminded of the gift of steadfast love given by our gracious God. In the gospel lesson we hear of Mary’s visit to her relative Elizabeth. Inspired by the Holy Spirit the elder Elizabeth addresses Mary as the “mother of my Lord”. The child in Elizabeth’s womb leapt for joy at the sound of Mary’s voice. Mary rejoices in God her Savior. She rejoiced in the mercy of God. Mercy is the steadfast love of God ever at work, reaching out to lift the lowly, bring comfort to the downhearted, embrace the rejected, rescue the lost, befriend the lonely, and heal the wounded soul.

My waitress worried about her friend who had gone through an experience of physical trauma and emotional suffering. Let us pray for those who find it hard to deal with the superficialities of an empty holiday season. Pray for them to know the true Christmas holiday: the steadfast love and mercy of Jesus, the Savior born to show favor on the lowly and grant soul-healing mercy for all who come to him.

Let us pray: *Thank you, gracious God, for you are ever filling us with your unconditional love: you forgive our sins, never forsake us, and provide healing for the soul. We pray that you be with those who are struggling with pain, past and present. Be with them, be their strength, and grant them endurance. Thank you for the confidence of knowing your steadfast love and mercy, for you sent to us Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*



## **Monday, December 21**

Text: John 20: 24-29

Verse: *“Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’”*

This day the church calendar commemorates the disciple Thomas. We read the well-known story of Thomas in the gospel text for the First Sunday after Easter. Jesus, risen from the dead, appeared to his disciples on that first Easter evening but Thomas was absent. When Thomas joined the disciples he was told the good news. Thomas was skeptical and made his position clear, “Unless I see Jesus with my own two eyes, and actually touch the wounds of the cross, I will not believe.” Because of his hesitancy to believe, he has earned the nickname of “Doubting Thomas”. But there is much to commend Thomas’ decision to put faith on hold. Although he heard the joyous witness of his brothers and sisters, Thomas knew they could not believe for him. Faith would have to come from Thomas’ own heartfelt conviction. Maybe Thomas thought the other disciples saw some kind of ghostly apparition. Thomas knew the gospel could not be a glorified ghost story. Thomas wanted to be sure and see a bodily resurrected Jesus with the wounds of the cross plainly visible.

Underneath Thomas’ skepticism or doubt was a prayer: Thomas truly wanted to believe and he needed help to have faith. Thomas had to wait a whole week before his silent prayer was answered. Jesus came and stood among the disciples with his gift of peace. Then he gave Thomas his undivided attention, inviting the uncertain disciple to place his hands in the wounds of the cross. Jesus told him, “Do not doubt but believe.” Jesus did not say this to scold the man but to open Thomas’ heart for the gift of faith. When Jesus speaks good things happen like healings, forgiveness of sins, and now faith. Thomas would confess now without a doubt, “My Lord and my God.” Jesus assured the power of his word for faith when he gave a blessing for all times and places, “Blessed are those who have not seen yet have come to believe.”

There are many things in this world we do not understand: why so much violence and hatred in the world; why does it hurt so much when a loved one has died; why do I continue to sin in thought, word, and deed? But faith is not about having all the answers all the time. Faith is based on the steadfast love of God, who became a human being, Jesus, to dwell among us. Faith is based on Jesus’ dependable friendship—and never desertion of sinful people. Faith is based on Jesus’ death on the cross, and his resurrection from the dead for our salvation by grace. Like Thomas we may suffer through times of uncertainty and doubt. But Jesus hears what is beneath

the doubt. Jesus comes. He comes in peace. Christmas is about Jesus' coming to this sinful world to reveal the truth of God's gracious will to save sinners and not forsake or forget them. Soon you will hear the Christmas Gospels, the story of Jesus' birth from Luke, and the beginning of John's gospel, announcing the Word who became flesh to live among us. As we listen, know Jesus is coming to you with the gift of faith. May we say "My Lord and my God!"

*Let us Pray: Almighty and everlasting God, you strengthened your apostle Thomas with firm and certain faith in your Son's resurrection. Keep us, through all our days, steadfast in that same faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*



**Tuesday, December 22**

Text: Colossians 3:12-17

Verse: "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

A few days ago the church calendar commemorated a unique Lutheran saint: Katharina Von Bora, and shall we say "Katie" for short. Katie was born in 1499 of parents with noble lineage (you can tell with the "von" in the name). But her parents had fallen on hard times. At age 16 Katie took her vows to be a nun at a convent where her aunt was in charge (the abbess).

When the teachings of the Reformation began to spread, many nuns left their cloistered life, Katie among them. Many of them looked for husbands. Katie was very independent and refused to marry possible candidates chosen for her. She had her mind made up: she wanted to marry Martin Luther. Martin and Katie were engaged on June 23, 1525. It was a very short engagement for they were married on the same day.

Katie was known for her expert management of household duties and finances. She was in charge not only of the kitchen. Katie also looked after the brewery and a farm that was purchased from her brother. Katie was good at managing the details of the farm: the gardens, the crops, and the livestock. Luther affectionately called her the "boss". Luther with his teaching, preaching and writing had no time to manage household and farm. Luther probably was appreciative of her careful management of the family brewery. Luther thanked God for a "pious and true wife on whom the husband's heart can rely."

Katie was sixteen years younger than Martin. After Martin's death in 1546, things did not go well for Katie. War ruined her property. Plague broke out in her hometown of Wittenberg, and when she sought to move she was seriously injured in a "traffic accident". The horses driving her carriage were spooked and the Katie fell or leaped from the carriage. She died on December 20, 1552.

There is much activity in the Christian household as Christmas Day approaches. Many women working full time may have the added stress of holiday preparations. We think especially of single mothers who are busy with their jobs while nurturing and raising children. Recently I heard of single mom with three jobs: driving school bus, cashier at a store, and working as a waitress in the evening. Remembering Katie (Von Bora) Luther, we pray for the strengthening of Christian homes, for all whose duties are many and burdensome, and for faithfulness to Christ. I am sure both Luthers knew God was glorified when parents faithfully manage the household, raising the children, and teaching both with word and example the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let us Pray:

*God of steadfast love, you joined your servants Katharina von Bora and Martin Luther in holy marriage and established in their life together a model of the Christian home. Brighten our lives with the wonder of love, bring into order the chaos of our manifold responsibilities, and enrich us with your life, that we may learn the joy of serving others and at last inherit the gladness of your unending kingdom; through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*



**Wednesday, December 23**

Text: Isaiah 11: 1-9

Verse: *“He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor.”*

Every year at both Thanksgiving time and Christmas a member of the congregation I serve comes to me with a request. He wants to provide a full holiday meal for a family in need. Would I please have such a family in mind and tell him how many people would be at the dinner table. He buys all the supplies: usually a turkey for Thanksgiving and a ham for Christmas. Also included are vegetables, rolls and dessert. He asks me to deliver the food to the family and he strictly wants to remain anonymous. It is a generous gesture and he never fails to do this every year. I must admit at times it feels awkward for me since I have to “select” a poor family. There are so many in need and it could be said the money would be better used through a donation to the food pantry. But every year he tells me the story of why he wants to help a family with food. When he was growing up in the Milwaukee area his family was poor. There was genuine appreciation when a box full of groceries came to his family home during the holidays from the church they attended.

The reading today from Isaiah spoke of an ideal king who would come from David’s lineage. Instead of concern for amassing a personal fortune through royal power, this king’s heart would be for the poor and needy. This king “with righteousness shall judge the poor.” The king desires to make things right in the community, ruling through the wisdom of the Spirit of God. Through Spirit-endowed wisdom the king will not judge by appearance or gossip, but with compassion and fairness for all those easily forgotten and condemned. The reading ends with a beautiful

vision of peace with an end to all violence, a hope we certainly long for in this troubled world, “they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord.”

Jesus came to this world with a special heart for the poor and rejected. He knew the Spirit of the Lord rested upon him, guiding him to reveal the love, mercy and grace of God to people who could very well have thought God had forgotten them, or even worse, rejected them. Jesus would act with righteousness meaning God’s saving power to lift the lowly and heal wounded souls with the love of God. The gospel of Matthew tells us that Jesus came to bear all our infirmity and grief. Because of God coming to earth in the birth of Jesus, we can be confident that we are never beyond the reach of our Lord’s compassion in our distress and need.

In the reading you may have noticed a portion that is used in our liturgy for baptism and confirmation. We pray for the Spirit of the Lord and the Spirit’s gifts of wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord, and joy in God’s presence. Under the Spirit’s comfort and care, may we not judge by appearance or from what we hear as gossip. Our Christian faith celebrates the lowliness of God revealed in Jesus, lowly so to lift us up. May the Lord lift your spirit with the Holy Spirit, ever reminding that you are a precious child of God, and called to touch others with compassion.

*Let us Pray: Gracious God, you inspired the prophet Isaiah to speak of the coming of a king who would rule with righteousness and peace. This king has come to us in Jesus. May his rule of forgiveness, mercy, healing and love touch our lives and strengthen our resolve to serve you. We pray for the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, enlightening us and guiding us to help those in need. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.*



**Thursday, December 24**

Text: Luke 2: 1-14

Verse: “But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see -- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

During the month of December the Confirmation class takes a break from their catechetical studies to do fun stuff. We bake cookies and make care packages. We go caroling. We make Christmas cards. Another task we tackle is decorating a Christmas tree that is placed in the fellowship hall. This year with a class of six I figured the tree would be decorated in no time. But there was a momentary delay. Two girls got into an argument: each one wanted the privilege of putting the decorative angel on the top of the tree. The matter was settled when the oldest student was permitted to put the angel on top; her challenger was granted the privilege of plugging in the lights when the decorating was finished. The chosen ornaments were all angels in various sizes

and colors. It was truly an angel-themed tree. I told the class they were angels, too, for by their decorating work they were messengers of the joy of the Christmas message. And don't worry about disagreements for even earth-based angels can have arguments now and then.

Angels play an important part in all the birth narratives found in the Gospel of Luke. Although they came to the shepherds with good news, angels have the unfortunate tendency to scare mortal human beings. Angels must be taught to preface their messages with "Do not be afraid." Once they got the fear out of the way, the angels spoke the gospel in truth and purity. A Savior is born, a Savior born for you. Martin Luther always stressed the gospel can only be properly heard when it is much more than information; it is a saving announcement for you.

The angels wanted to be sure the shepherds took a trip to Bethlehem to see the new born Jesus. The angels wanted the shepherds to see their Savior in the flesh. Martin Luther would say that what there is to know about God is not discovered through our speculation and searching. We turn to where God has revealed his love and grace; so Luther would have us go to Bethlehem and see Jesus nursing at Mary's breast. The tiny, helpless infant we confess to be God-in-the-flesh. In the mystery of grace it is Jesus' helplessness, whether in the manger or on the cross, that saves us.

The angels came, delivered the gospel message, sang the Gloria, and then went back to heaven. The angels did not stick around; instead they gave clear directions where to find the joy, the birth of Jesus, the Savior for all people.

Let us Pray: *All powerful and unseen God, the coming of your light into our world has brightened weary hearts with peace. Call us out of darkness, and empower us to proclaim the birth of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*



### **Friday, December 25: The Nativity of our Lord**

Text: John 1: 1-14

Verse: *"But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."*

In late November a janitor of a Roman Catholic Church in Queens, NY, got quite a surprise. He was setting up the Nativity scene in the front of the church. He took his lunch break. When he came back he heard the sound of a baby crying. Someone had left a newborn baby boy-umbilical cord still attached—in the manger. What do you do with an abandoned newborn? Of course you call 911 and have the baby taken to hospital to be examined. Then you call the police and begin

an investigation and find the mother of the child. Security video footage may well provide the answer.

But there is a deeper matter here that goes beyond health and law enforcement. The parish priest spoke of the symbolism: “A church is a home for those in need, and the mother felt, in this stable—a place where Jesus will find his home—a home for her child.” The Christmas Day gospel said Jesus came to make his home among humankind: “And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” Home is a theme in the Gospel of John. Jesus came to make his home with humankind to prepare a permanent home for us in the Father’s House—“in my Father’s house there are many rooms, and I go and prepare a place for you.” (John 14: 1-6).

You have noticed that the Gospel of John does not talk about angels visiting shepherds, or Mary and Joseph watching over their baby in Bethlehem. The Gospel of John declares the coming of Jesus as the coming of God. Jesus always was with God, and is God. Jesus is the source of life. Jesus is the light no darkness can ever overcome. God became a human being to take us home with him; in John’s parlance home is ‘eternal life’ or permanent fellowship with God.

John’s Gospel helps us understand the enduring gift of Christmas. Our indoor and outdoor decorations of manger scenes complete with angels, wise men, shepherds, and animals are taken down and put away soon enough. John’s gospel made clear the gift that comes with the Word made flesh. By God’s grace, all who believe in Jesus are children of God, permanent within the household of God. Jesus reveals God’s glory, and glory like light attracts us. It is God’s glory to have us as his sons and daughters forever. As it says later in the Gospel Jesus, the Son of God, has set us free from the slavery of sin so we belong in the household of God forever.

*Let us Pray: Almighty God, you gave us your only Son to take on our human nature and to illumine the world with your light. By your grace adopt us as your children and enlighten us with your Spirit, through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*



**Saturday, December 26**

Text: Acts 6:8-7:2a, 51-60

Verse: “While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

As I am writing this, I am looking at my latest nativity scene acquisition. It is a self-contained piece from Peru, purchased from a Serrv Craft sale. Mary and Joseph are looking down lovingly on their child in the manger, all of them dressed like Indians from the Andes. On either side of the Holy Family are llamas, fitting for this Peruvian made craft. I enjoy nativity scenes that show

race, color, and culture from different places in the world. Jesus truly is the Savior of the world and the Bible says the time will come when peoples of all tribes, languages, and nations will worship him.

What makes this Nativity unique is the backdrop. It is not the traditional stable. The Holy Family is sheltered in a cross-shaped background, much taller than the family and llama figures. Above the Holy Family beautiful flowers are looking at the child, perhaps representing the worship of all creation. In the center is a dove, the Holy Spirit, perhaps calling our attention not only to Jesus' birth, but the larger picture of the cross. This little Nativity Scene has wonderful theology. Even from the time of his birth the cross was in the background. Jesus would give his life for our salvation.

Today is the festival of St. Stephen. As you read in Acts, Stephen was stoned to death. Stephen had been brought before the Council in Jerusalem to answer questions about his preaching of Jesus. Stephen eventually accused his questioners of being stiff-necked, disobedient, and opposing the Holy Spirit. Tough words. Stephen was dragged out of the council and outside of the city of Jerusalem and stoned to death. Details of his death sounded like the death of our Lord: Stephen was taken out of the city, and then on his lips he asked forgiveness for his persecutors, as did Jesus.

The Christmas season takes us to January 6<sup>th</sup>, the feast of the Epiphany. Christmas is a time of joy and celebration, singing hymns of peace and goodwill toward men. St. Stephen's day is a rude reminder of just the kind of world it is: the power of sin, although defeated by our Lord, still is at work and opposes the message and mercy of our Lord Jesus. Christmas does not exempt anyone from suffering and trials. The mission of the church is still difficult: justice in an unjust world, welcome and compassion when we hear so many words of hatred and rejection, sharing and proclaiming the gospel in a world of so many distractions. The life of the Christian, the life of the church is shaped by the cross. Christmas and the cross go together. Jesus came to save us and deliver us from sin, death, and the devil, and this deliverance meant the cross and then his resurrection. Although the cross of faithfulness and service is ours to bear, we do not do so alone. We have Jesus, and Jesus has us, and he leads the way and will not forsake us.

Let us Pray: *We give you thanks, O Lord of glory, for the example of the first martyr Stephen, who looked up to heaven and prayed for his persecutors to your Son Jesus Christ, who stands at your right hand; where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.*

