

Devotions – December 25-31, 2016

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Sunday, December 25, 2016

***“Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her king;
let every heart prepare him room and heav’n and nature sing,
and heav’n and nature sing, and heav’n and heav’n and nature sing.”
-Evangelical Lutheran Worship #267***

What a day! For our entire lives we have made time for the Christmas celebration. If you were in Hawaii on Christmas Eve; if you were in Moscow or Dar es Salaam—it would make no difference. The weather in Houghton might be different than the weather in Nairobi—but you would still pause and you would still celebrate Christmas, wherever you are on December 25. So why is that?

Some years the kids are all home, some year you may be all by yourself on Christmas Day. In some decades we are very busy, buying gifts and making meals and sending cards and planning parties. And in other times in our lives that pattern changes. So what is the one thing that holds true no matter what? That one thing would be JOY!

The hymnist nails it—gets it exactly right! There is joy in our world today because the Lord is with us. The one who creates and sustains all of existence has made an appearance. God has shown up and God is with God’s people.

So, you may have turkey today for dinner surrounded by twenty family members. Or you may be eating leftovers all by yourself. No matter! God is with you—and that, my friends, defines joy.

“Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her king.”

Let us pray: Thank you, God, for joy! Your presence in our midst is our life! Bless this joy and keep it coming. Help us to live in the joy that only you can give, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



Monday, December 26, 2016

***“Of the Father’s love begotten ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega, he the source, the ending he, of the things that are,***

that have been, and that future years shall see, evermore and evermore.”
-Evangelical Lutheran Worship #295

Walking along the lake shore on a cold winter day can be a spiritual experience. Every step you take makes only the slightest noise on the ground as your boots grab the snow. It seems so quiet. The birds of the air and the fish in the water are unseen. Very few people brave the cold. You are left with your own thoughts. It is a good time to think and to pray.

Looking at a baby sleeping in a crib can be a spiritual experience. You see a human being that has a great deal of potential. You wonder what its life will be like long after you are gone in fifty or sixty years. What great things and what terrible things will happen to this baby in its lifetime? Watching that sleeping child provides a good time to think and pray.

Our Christmas hymn today is one of the oldest that the modern Christian Church still sings. The words remind me of that walk along the frozen lakeshore and of watching that sleeping baby. Quiet, peaceful and very powerful are ways to describe the mystical power of God in life. All of creation is linked in this hymn literally from “Alpha to Omega” the beginning and the ending. The hymn summarizes the hopes and yearnings of all eternity when the 4th century writer says, “He the source, the ending he, of the things that are, that have been, and that future years shall see...” This hymn tells me each time I sing it that our God is in charge of all creation. And we are in the hands of a God who prevails in this life “evermore and evermore.”

Let us pray: In the midst of a world that is at war with itself—come to us, O God. In the center of our lives make yourself known that we might see you. For we trust in the God of all eternity. Come crucified one and make us new. Amen.



Tuesday, December 27, 2016

***“Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart and soul and voice;
Give ye heed to what we say: Jesus Christ is born today;
Ox and ass before him bow, and he is in the manger now.
Christ is born today! Christ is born today!
-Evangelical Lutheran Worship #288***

When I was 13 years old and in the seventh grade our school art class made Christmas decorations. I still have the one I made and it shows up even now on a table in our living room. It is a Christmas tree made from toilet paper rolls, aluminum foil and little glass bulbs all connected with paper clips. It turned out great! I received an “A” for it in class and my mother suggested I make a few more for Christmas gifts for my aunts and uncles. I did. That original

decoration made in 1967 has, alas, seen better days. It is after all, almost fifty years old. One of the glass balls broke, some foil has ripped exposing a toilet roll. The paper clips are even getting a little rusty. Nothing seems to last forever!

Then I sing the Christmas hymn today. “Give ye heed to what we say: Jesus Christ is born today.” Now I know, and you know, that Jesus was born about 2000 years ago. In twenty centuries lots has happened—yet the hymn which has roots in a Medieval Latin carol says **“Christ is born today!”**

Wow! Just think of it. The news of the birth is so powerful and earth-shaking that it is more than a historical reality. The birth of Jesus is happening each and every year, whenever the words of the Gospel are read. And it connects us with an event in the distant past to the point we can say Jesus is born to us! To you and to me and thus we can rejoice. It is not magic but it is a miracle. “He is in the manger now!”

I like that Christmas decoration I made five decades ago. It may wear out or get lost or crumble into dust one day and be thrown away by some great-grandchild. Yet I know that it reminds me every time I pull it out of the decoration box that the power of Christmas is in God’s presence in our lives each and every year. “Rejoice with heart and soul and voice.”

Let us pray: You are so great, O God, that you power into our existence each and every year with the news that Jesus is born today! You have become flesh in our lives, our friend and our companion. Thank you for lifting us out of our own self-made disasters. Thank you for giving us reason to rejoice! In the Christ’s name we pray. Amen.



Wednesday, December 28, 2016

***“Your little ones, dear Lord, are we, and come your lowly bed to see;
enlighten every soul and mind, that we the way to you may find.”
-Evangelical Lutheran Worship #286***

Today, the 28th of December, the Church remembers the “Massacre of the Holy Innocents.” The story is an awful one right in the middle of the Christmas season (today is the fourth day of Christmas!). We hear in Scripture of Herod whose anger and jealousy were so evil that he ordered the murder of innocent children in an effort to kill the “new born King.” It is an ugly and horrible story that shows us the cruelty of human beings. And it is a story that must be told.

Every time I write about the massacre of the Holy Innocents, there are new contemporary stories of the innocents being murdered. This year, 2016, I am thinking of the people of Aleppo in Syria

who have been in the center of a four year civil war. The Syrian government and their Russian supporters are killing thousands of men and women and children. It is ugly and terrible.

What can we say to this? Jesus was born into a sin-filled world. Forced to flee his home, Jesus and his parents became refugees in Africa and the people of Egypt saved their lives. Yet Jesus would return to his home and he would liberate it. The world of sin and death, murder and mayhem is the world Jesus came to save. Jesus understands sin, our evil world and our own self-centeredness which is the center of sin. Jesus has us figured out—and loves us anyway! In the midst of massacres, disasters, human error and total depravity—Jesus surrounds us and loves us. Like a parent embracing his children, Jesus holds us forever. And that my friends is very good news!

Let us pray: Lord, there is so much in the world that we cannot understand. We pray for those around the world who suffer. Today we think of the innocents. Bless the people of Aleppo, the people of Afghanistan and Iraq. Bless the innocents in all lands, including our own. All praise to you - Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen



Thursday, December 29, 2016

***“The first noel the angel did say was to certain poor shepherds in field as they lay;
in fields where they lay, keeping their sheep, on a cold winter’s night that was so deep.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel! Born is the King of Israel.
-Evangelical Lutheran Worship #300***

The font of all knowledge “Wikipedia” tells us about the word NOEL! “English speakers borrowed the word noel from French. It can be traced further back to the Latin word natalis which can mean ‘birthday’ as a noun or ‘of or relating to birth’ as an adjective. Noels were being sung in Latin or French for centuries before the word found its way into our language in the 1800’s.”

I have great memories of my “birthdays.” As a child I had all my young “buds” over for hot dogs and cake and baseball. As a college student, my friends took me out for an evening of laughs. As a father and husband my family gives me little gifts and my friends remind me how old I am getting. Most years there are candles and cards and an overly sugary cake. I think your experiences of birthdays are probably very similar.

This Christmas business, this is day five of the 12 days, is a birthday celebration for a real person. We call Jesus “true God and true man.” And since he was “true man” he had a day he was born. And like any of us a celebration is due. This hymn reminds us that the angels were the first ones who proclaimed the news. In a sense they were the ones who sang “Happy Birthday.” What is powerful about this story (angels in heaven was a very good start) was the fact that the

shepherds were the angels audience. Shepherds who had a reputation for being thieves and thugs, dirty and poor were invited to the birthday party that night.

Have a party for Jesus! Light a candle. And eat some cake. Celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Let us pray: Happy Birthday Jesus! Help us to celebrate your birth. "Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel! Born is the king of Israel." Amen



Friday, December 30, 2016

***"What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet while shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the king, whom shepherds guard and angels sing;
Haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary!"
-Evangelical Lutheran Worship #296***

Mary must have been asking the question. She was certainly pondering all these things in her heart. "What child is this," she could have asked, "who is laid to rest on my lap?" Mary was young and had come from a simple family. She was not royal by birth. She probably had little education. She was innocent. And she had just given birth to the Lord of the universe!

Martin Luther called her "mother of God" often throughout his entire career. While not being worshiped, Luther said, she was to be remembered as a woman of great faith who took upon herself the Son of God. Mary and Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, are known to us as the protectors of the Holy Family.

It would be Mary, mother of our Lord who would follow Jesus in his ministry. It would be Mary who would stand before the cross watching her son die in Jerusalem. "What child is this?" she could have asked that terrible day. This child who is on Mary's lap would become in the words of the explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles Creed the one who "has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil." At Christmas we must ask the question. Who is this Jesus? Who is he in our lives? The same question that begins this Christmas hymn is the center question for us in our lives. Who will Jesus be in your life today and tomorrow?

Let us pray: Dearest Jesus, we love you and give thanks for your love to us. We celebrate the beautiful and faithful witness of Mary and Joseph. Help us, like Mary to embrace you, hold onto you throughout our lives and cling to the cross of Christ above all else. Amen



Saturday, December 31, 2016

**“Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright,
round yon virgin mother and child.
Holy infant, so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace,
sleep in heavenly peace.”
-Evangelical Lutheran Worship #281**

When did you hear this hymn last sung? When I was in the parish, serving at Trinity Church in Ishpeming we sang “Silent Night” during the lighting of the candles on Christmas Eve. The church lights were dimmed, the ushers assisting those in church lighting the candles. I would read from the Gospel of St. John. Standing behind the altar I could see in the darkness the 100+ people in church, all with their own candles. Most would be staring into the flame, singing but in deep thought. As their pastor I would look out and see the college age boy home for vacation, the 85 year old woman recently widowed, the single dad thinking of happier days. In the light of the candles, as we sang the hymn I could see the teen age girl making eye contact with her friends, the tired mom worried about supper on the stove. It was Christmas Eve and we needed to light the candles and sing the hymn.

There is something powerful about this hymn and its promise that “All is calm.” We know that in our world little is calm, even on Christmas Eve. The hymn gives us the assurance that the same God who raised Jesus from the dead and the same God who sent Jesus into the world has creation under control.

Looking out into the crowd on Christmas Eve, I see the Gospel light making all the difference in the lives of people. Like that candle lighting up your face in a darkened church, the light of Jesus shines for you. After worship and after the Christmas parties and gift giving, God’s people can go to their beds confident that they can “sleep in heavenly peace.”

Let us pray: The nights are cold, O God. The days can seem so short in December. As we peek into a new year, remind us that you are the only one who can give us hope. We lean into your grace. Help us serve your people. All praise to you Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

